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GOD'S GOOD MAN

A SIMPLE LOVE STORY

BY

MARIE CORELLI

AUTHOR OF "BARABBAS," "THE SORROWS OF SATAN," "BOY,"
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VOL. I

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GOD'S GOOD MAN.

CHAPTER I.

It was May-time in England.

The last breath of a long winter had blown its final farewell across the hills,—the last frost had melted from the broad, low-lying fields, relaxing its iron grip from the clods of rich, red-brown earth which now, soft and broken, were sprouting thick with the young corn's tender green. It had been a hard, inclement season. Many a time, since February onward, had the too-eagerly pushing buds of trees and shrubs been nipped by cruel cold,—many a biting east wind had withered the first pale green leaves of the lilac and the hawthorn,—and the stormy caprices of a chill northern Spring had played havoc with all the dainty woodland blossoms that should, according to the ancient "Shepherd's Calendar" have been flowering fully with the daffodils and primroses. But during the closing days of April a sudden grateful warmth had set in,—Nature, the divine goddess, seemed to awaken from long slumber and stretch out her arms with a happy smile,—and when May morning dawned on the world, it came as a vision of glory, robed in clear sunshine and girdled with

bluest skies. Birds broke into enraptured song,—young almond and apple boughs quivered almost visibly every moment into pink and white bloom,—cowslips and blue-bells raised their heads from mossy corners in the grass, and expressed their innocent thoughts in sweetest odour —and in and through all things the glorious thrill, the mysterious joy of renewed life, hope and love pulsated from the Creator to His responsive creation.

It was May-time; a real "old-fashioned" English May, such as Spenser and Herrick sang of:

> "When all is yclad
> With blossoms; the ground with grass, the woodes
> With greene leaves; the bushes with blossoming buddes,"

and when whatever promise our existence yet holds for us seems far enough away to inspire ambition, yet close enough to encourage fair dreams of fulfilment. To experience this glamour and witchery of the flowering-time of the year, one must, perforce, be in the country. For in the towns, the breath of Spring is fœtid and feverish, —it arouses sick longings and weary regrets, but scarcely any positive ecstasy. The close, stuffy streets, the swarming people, the high buildings and stacks of chimneys which only permit the narrowest patches of sky to be visible, the incessant noise and movement, the self-absorbed crowding and crushing,—all these things are so many offences to Nature, and are as dead walls of obstacle set against the revivifying and strengthening forces with which she endows her freer children of the forest, field and mountain. Out on the wild heathery moorland, in the heart of the woods, in the deep bosky dells, where the pungent scent of moss and pine-boughs fills the air with invigorating influences, or by the quiet rivers, flowing

peacefully under bending willows and past wide osier-beds, where the king-fisher swoops down with the sun-ray and the timid moor-hen paddles to and from her nest among the reeds,—in such haunts as these, the advent of a warm and brilliant May is fraught with that tremor of delight which gives birth to beauty, and concerning which that ancient and picturesque chronicler, Sir Thomas Malory, writes exultantly: "Like as May moneth flourisheth and flowerth in many gardens, so in likewise let every man of worship flourish his heart in this world!"

There was a certain "man of worship" in the world at the particular time when this present record of life and love begins, who found himself very well-disposed to "flourish his heart" in the Maloryan manner prescribed, when after many dark days of unseasonable cold and general atmospheric depression, May at last came in rejoicing. Seated under broad apple-boughs, which spread around him like a canopy studded with rosy bud-jewels that shone glossy bright against the rough dark-brown stems, he surveyed the smiling scenery of his own garden with an air of satisfaction that was almost boyish, though his years had run well past forty, and he was a parson to boot. A gravely sedate demeanour would have seemed the more fitting facial expression for his age and the generally accepted nature of his calling,—a kind of deprecatory toleration of the sunshine as part of the universal "vanity" of mundane things,—or a condescending consciousness of the bursting apple-blossoms within his reach as a kind of inferior earthy circumstance which could neither be altered nor avoided.

The Reverend John Walden, however, was one of those rarely gifted individuals who cannot assume an aspect which is foreign to temperament. He was of a cheerful,

even sanguine disposition, and his countenance faithfully reflected the ordinary bent of his humour. Seeing him at a distance, the casual observer would at once have judged him to be either an athlete or an ascetic. There was no superfluous flesh about him; he was tall and muscular, with well-knit limbs, broad shoulders, and a head altogether lacking in the humble or conciliatory "droop" which all worldly-wise parsons cultivate for the benefit of their rich patrons. It was a distinctively proud head,—almost aggressive,—indicative of strong character and self-reliance, well-poised on a full throat, and set off by a considerable quantity of dark brown hair which was refractory in brushing, inclined to uncanonical curls, and plentifully dashed with grey. A broad forehead, deeply-set, dark-blue eyes, a straight and very prominent nose, a strong jaw and obstinate chin,—a firmly moulded mouth, round which many a sweet and tender thought had drawn kindly little lines of gentle smiling that were scarcely hidden by the silver-brown moustache,—such, briefly, was the appearance of one, who though only a country clergyman, of whom the great world knew nothing, was the living representative of more powerful authority to his little "cure of souls" than either the bishop of the diocese, or the King in all his majesty.

He was the sole owner of one of the smallest "livings" in England,—an obscure, deeply-hidden, but perfectly unspoilt and beautiful relic of mediæval days, situated in one of the loveliest of woodland counties, and known as the village of St. Rest, sometimes called "St. Est." Until quite lately there had been considerable doubt as to the origin of this name, and the correct manner of its pronouncement. Some said it should be, "St. East," because, right across the purple moorland and beyond the line of blue

hills where the sun rose, there stretched the sea, miles away and invisible, it is true, but nevertheless asserting its salty savour in every breath of wind that blew across the tufted pines. "St. East," therefore, said certain rural sages, was the real name of the village, because it faced the sea towards the east. Others, however, declared that the name was derived from the memory of some early Norman church on the banks of the peaceful river that wound its slow clear length in pellucid silver ribbons of light round and about the clover fields and high banks fringed with wild rose and snowy thorn, and that it should, therefore, be "St. Rest," or, better still, "The Saint's Rest." This latter theory had recently received strong confirmation by an unexpected witness to the past,—as will presently be duly seen and attested.

But St. Rest, or St. Est, whichever name rightly belonged to it, was in itself so insignificant as a "benefice," that its present rector, vicar, priest and patron had bought it for himself, through the good offices of a friend, in the days when such purchases were possible, and for some ten years had been supreme Dictator of his tiny kingdom and limited people. The church was his,—especially his, since he had restored it entirely at his own expense,—— the rectory, a lop-sided, half-timbered house, built in the fifteenth century, was his,—the garden, full of flowering shrubs, carelessly planted and allowed to flourish at their own wild will, was his,—the ten acres of pasture-land that spread in green luxuriance round and about his dwelling were his,—and, best of all, the orchard, containing some five acres planted with the choicest apples, cherries, plums and pears, and bearing against its long, high southern wall the finest peaches and nectarines in the county, was his also. He had, in fact, everything that the heart of a man

especially the heart of a clergyman, could desire, except a wife,—and that commodity had been offered to him from many quarters in various delicate and diplomatic ways,—only to be as delicately and diplomatically rejected.

And truly there seemed no need for any change in his condition. He had gone on so far in life,—"so far!" he would occasionally remind himself, with a little smile and sigh,—that a more or less solitary habit had, by long familiarity, become pleasant. Actual loneliness he had never experienced, because it was not in his nature to feel lonely. His well-balanced intellect had the brilliant quality of a finely-cut diamond, bearing many facets, and reflecting all the hues of life in light and colour; thus it quite naturally happened that most things, even ordinary and common things, interested him. He was a great lover of books, and, to a moderate extent, a collector of rare editions; he also had a passion for archæology, wherein he was sustained by a certain poetic insight of which he was himself unconscious. The ordinary archæologist is generally a mere Dry-as-Dust, who plays with the bones of the past as Shakespeare's Juliet fancied she might play with her forefathers' joints, and who eschews all use of the imaginative instinct as though it were some deadly evil. Whereas, it truly needs a very powerful imaginative lens to peer down into the recesses of bygone civilisations, and repeople the ruined haunts of dead men with their shadowy ghosts of learning, art, enterprise, or ambition.

To use the innermost eyes of his soul in such looking backward down the stream of Time, as well as in looking forward to that "crystal sea" of the unknown Future, flowing round the Great White Throne whence the river of life proceeds, was a favourite mental occupation with John Walden. He loved antiquarian research, and all such

scientific problems as involve abstruse study and complex calculation,—but equally he loved the simplest flower and the most ordinary village tale of sorrow or mirth recounted to him by any one of his unlessoned parishioners. He gave himself such change of air and scene as he thought he required, by taking long swinging walks about the country, and found sufficient relaxation in gardening, a science in which he displayed considerable skill. No one in all the neighbourhood could match his roses, or offer anything to compare with the purple and white masses of violets which, quite early in January came out under his glass frames not only perfect in shape and colour, but full of the real "English" violet fragrance, a benediction of sweetness which somehow seems to be entirely withheld from the French and Russian blooms. For the rest, he was physically sound and morally healthy, and lived, as it were, on the straight line from earth to heaven, beginning each day as if it were his first life-opportunity, and ending it soberly and with prayer, as though it were his last.

To such a mind and temperament as his, the influences of Nature, the sublime laws of the Universe, and the environment of existence, must needs move in circles of harmonious unity, making loveliness out of commonness, and poetry out of prose. The devotee of what is mistakenly called "pleasure,"—enervated or satiated with the sickly moral exhalations of a corrupt society,—would be quite at a loss to understand what possible enjoyment could be obtained by sitting placidly under an apple-tree with a well-thumbed volume of the wisdom of the inspired pagan Slave, Epictetus, in the hand, and the eyes fixed, not on any printed page, but on a spray of warmly-blushing almond blossom, where a well-fed thrush, ruffling its softly speckled breast, was singing a wild strophe concern-

ing its mate, which, could human skill have languaged its meaning, might have given ideas to a nation's laureate. Yet John Walden found unalloyed happiness in this apparently vague and vacant way. There was an acute sense of joy for him in the repeated sweetness of the thrush's warbling,—the light breeze, stirring through a great bush of early flowering lilac near the edge of the lawn, sent out a wave of odour which tingled through his sensitive blood like wine,—the sunlight was warm and comforting, and altogether there seemed nothing wrong with the world, particularly as the morning's newspapers had not yet come in. With them would probably arrive the sad savour of human mischief and muddle, but till these daily morbid records made their appearance, May-day might be accepted as God made it and gave it,—a gift unalloyed, pure, bright and calm, with not a shadow on its lovely face of Spring. The Stoic spirit of Epictetus himself had even seemed to join in the general delight of nature, for Walden held the book half open at a page whereon these words were written:

"Had we understanding thereof, would any other thing better beseem us than to hymn the Divine Being and laud Him and rehearse His gracious deeds? These things it were fitting every man should sing, and to chant the greatest and divinest hymns for this, that He has given us the power to observe and consider His works, and a Way wherein to walk. If I were a nightingale, I would do after the manner of a nightingale; if a swan, after that of a swan. But now I am a reasoning creature, and it behoves me to sing the praise of God; this is my task, and this I do, nor as long as it is granted me, will I ever abandon this post. And you, too, I summon to join me in the same song."

"A wonderfully 'advanced' Christian way of looking at life, for a pagan slave of the time of Nero!" thought Walden, as his eyes wandered from the thrush on the almond tree, back to the volume in his hand,—"With all our teaching and preaching, we can hardly do better. I wonder——"

Here his mind became altogether distracted from classic lore, by the appearance of a very unclassic boy, clad in a suit of brown corduroys and wearing hob-nailed boots a couple of sizes too large for him, who, coming suddenly out from a box-tree alley behind the gabled corner of the rectory, shuffled to the extreme verge of the lawn and stopped there, pulling his cap off, and treading on his own toes from left to right, and from right to left in a state of sheepish hesitancy.

"Come along,—come along! Don't stand there, Bob Keeley!" And Walden rose, placing Epictetus on the seat he vacated. "What is it?"

Bob Keeley set his hob-nailed feet on the velvety lawn with gingerly precaution, and advancing cap in hand, produced a letter, slightly grimed by his thumb and finger.

"From Sir Morton, please, sir! Hurgent, 'e sez."

Walden took the missive, small and neatly folded, and bearing the words "Badsworth Hall" stamped in gold at the back of the envelope. Opening it, he read:

"Sir Morton Pippitt presents his compliments to the Reverend John Walden, and having a party of distinguished guests staying with him at the Hall, will be glad to know at what day and hour this week he can make a visit of inspection to the church with his friends."

A slight tinge of colour overspread Walden's face. Presently he smiled, and tearing up the note leisurely, put the fragments into one of his large loose coat pockets, for

to scatter a shred of paper on his lawn or garden paths was an offence which neither he nor any of those he employed ever committed.

"How is your mother, Bob?" he then said, approaching the stumpy urchin, who stood respectfully watching him and awaiting his pleasure.

"Please, sir, she's all right, but she coughs orful!"

"Coughs orful, does she?" repeated the Reverend John, musingly. "Ah, that is bad!—I am sorry! We must—let me think!—yes, Bob, we must see what we can do for her—eh?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bob meekly, turning his cap round and round and wondering what 'Passon' was thinking about to have such a 'funny look' in his eyes.

"Yes!" repeated Walden, cheerfully. "We must see what we can do for her! My compliments to Sir Morton Pippitt, Bob, and say I will write."

"Nothink else, sir?"

"Nothing—or as you put it, Bob, 'nothink else!' I wish you would remember, my dear boy,"—and here he laid his firm, well-shaped hand protectingly on the small brown corduroy shoulder,—"that the word 'nothing' does not terminate in a 'k.' If you refer to your spelling-book, I am sure you will see that I am right. The Educational authorities would not approve of your pronunciation, Bob, and I am endeavouring to save you future trouble with the Government. By the way, did Sir Morton Pippitt give you anything for bringing his note to me?"

"Sed he would when I got back, sir."

"Said he would when you got back? Well,—I have my doubts, Bob,—I do not think he will. And the labourer being worthy of his hire, here is sixpence, which, if you like to do a sum on your slate, you will find is at

the rate of one penny per mile. When you are a working man, you will understand the strict justice of my payment. It is three miles from Badsworth Hall and three back again,—and now I come to think of it, what were you doing up at Badsworth?"

Bob Keeley grinned from ear to ear.

"Me an' Kitty Spruce went up on spec with a Maypole early, sir!"

John Walden smiled. It was May morning,—of course it was!—and in the village of St. Rest the old traditional customs of May Day were still kept up, though in the county town of Riversford, only seven miles away, they were forgotten, or if remembered at all, were only used as an excuse for drinking and vulgar horse-play.

"You and Kitty Spruce went up on spec? Very enterprising of you both, I am sure! And did you make anything out of it?"

"No, sir,—there ain't no ladies there, 'cept Miss Tabitha,—onny some London gents,—and Sir Morton, 'e flew into an orful passion—like 'e do, sir—an' told us to leave off singin' and git out,—'Git off my ground,' he 'ollers—'Git off!'—then jest as we was a-gittin' off, he cools down suddint like, an' 'e sez, sez 'e: 'Take a note to the dam passon for me, an' bring a harnser, an' I'll give yer somethink when yer gits back.' An' all the gents was a-sittin' at breakfast, with the winders wide open an' the smell of 'am an' eggs comin' through strong, an' they larfed fit to split theirselves, an' one on 'em tried to kiss Kitty Spruce, an' she spanked his face for 'im!"

The narration of this remarkable incident, spoken with breathless rapidity in a burst of confidence, seemed to cause the relief supposed to be obtained by a penitent in the confessional, and to lift a weight off Bob Keeley's mind.

The smile deepened on the "Passon's" face, and for a moment he had some difficulty to control an outbreak of laughter, but, recollecting the possibly demoralising effect it might have on the more youthful members of the community, if he, the spiritual director of the parish were reported to have laughed at the pugnacious conduct of the valiant Kitty Spruce, he controlled himself, and assumed a tolerantly serious air.

"That will do, Bob!—that will do! You must learn not to repeat all you hear, especially such objectionable words as may occasionally be used by a——a——a gentleman of Sir Morton Pippitt's high standing."

And here he squared his shoulders and looked severely down on the abashed Keeley. Anon he unbent himself somewhat and his eyes twinkled with kindly humour: "Why didn't you bring the Maypole here?" he inquired; "I suppose you thought it would not be as good a 'spec' as Badsworth Hall and the London gents—eh?"

Bob Keeley opened his round eyes very wide.

"We be all comin' 'ere, sir!" he burst out. "All on us —ever so many on us! But we reckoned to make a round of the village first and see how we took on, and finish up wi' you, sir! Kitty Spruce she be a-keepin' her best ribbin for comin' 'ere—we be all a-comin' 'fore twelve!"

Walden smiled.

"Good! I shall expect you! And mind you don't all sing out of tune when you do come. If you commit such an offence, I shall——let me see!—I shall make mincemeat of you!—I shall indeed! Positive mincemeat!—and bottle you up in jars for Christmas!" And he nodded with the ferociously bland air of the giant in a fairy tale, whose particular humour is the devouring of small children. "Now you had better get back to Badsworth Hall with

my message. Do you remember it? My compliments to Sir Morton Pippitt, and I will write."

He turned away, and Bob Keeley made as rapid a departure as was consistent with the deep respect he felt for the "Passon," having extracted a promise from the butcher boy of the village, who was a friend of his, that if he were "quick about it," he would get a drive up to Badsworth and back again in the butcher's cart going there for orders, instead of tramping it.

The Reverend John, meanwhile, strolled down one of the many winding garden paths, past clusters of daffodils, narcissi and primroses, into a favourite corner which he called the "Wilderness," because it was left by his orders in a more or less untrimmed, untrained condition of luxuriantly natural growth. Here the syringa, a name sometimes given by horticultural pedants to the lilac, for no reason at all except to create confusion in the innocent minds of amateur growers, was opening its white "mock orange" blossoms, and a mass of flowering aconites spread out before him like a carpet of woven gold. Here, too, tufts of bluebells peeped forth from behind the moss-grown stems of several ancient oaks and elms, and purple pansies bordered the edge of the grass. A fine old wistaria grown in tree-form, formed a natural arch of entry to this shady retreat, and its flowers were just now in their full beauty, hanging in a magnificent profusion of pale mauve grapelike bunches from the leafless stems. Many roses, of the climbing or "rambling" kind, were planted here, and John Walden's quick eye soon perceived where a long green shoot of one of those was loose and waving in the wind to its own possible detriment. He felt in his pockets for a bit of roffia or twine to tie up the straying stem,—he was very seldom without some-

thing of the kind for such emergencies, but this time he only groped among the fragments of Sir Morton Pippitt's note and found nothing useful. Stepping out on the path again, he looked about him and caught a glimpse of a stooping, bulky form in weather-beaten garments, planting something in one of the borders at a little distance.

"Bainton!" he called.

The figure slowly raised itself, and as slowly turned its head.

"Sir!"

"Just come here and tie this rose up, will you?"

The individual addressed approached at a very deliberate pace, dragging out some entangled roffia from his pocket as he came and severing it into lengths with his teeth. Walden partly prepared his task for him by holding up the rose branch in the way it should go, and on his arrival assisted him in the business of securing it to the knotty bough from which it had fallen.

"That looks better!" he remarked approvingly, as he stepped back and surveyed it. "You might do this one at the same time while you are about it, Bainton."

And he pointed to a network of "Crimson rambler" rose-stems which had blown loose from their moorings and were lying across the grass.

"This place wants a reg'lar clean out," remarked Bainton then, in accents of deep disdain, as he stooped to gather up the refractory branches: "It beats me, altogether Passon, to know what you wants wi' a forcin' bed for weeds an' stuff in the middle of a decent garden. That old Wistaria Sinyens (Sinensis) is the only thing here that is worth keeping. Ah! Y'are a precious sight, y'are!" he continued, apostrophising the "rambler" branches—"For all yer green buds ye ain't a-goin' to do much this year

All sham an' 'umbug, y'are!—all leaf an' shoot an' no flower,—like a great many people I knows on—ah!—an' not so far from this village neither! I'd clear it all out if I was you, Passon,—I would reely now!"

Walden laughed.

"Don't open the old argument, Bainton!" he said good-humouredly. "We have talked of this before. I like a bit of wild Nature sometimes."

"Wild natur!" echoed Bainton. "Seems to me natur allus wants a bit of a wash an' brush up 'fore she sits down to her master's table;—an' who's 'er master? Man! She's jest like a child comin' out of a play in the woods, an' 'er 'air's all blown, an' 'er nails is all dirty. That's natur! Trim 'er up an' curl 'er 'air an' she's worth looking at. Natur! Lor', Passon, if ye likes wild natur ye ain't got no call to keep a gard'ner. But if ye pays me an' keeps me, ye must 'spect me to do my duty. Wherefore I sez: why not 'ave this 'ere musty-fusty place, a reg'ler breedin' 'ole for hinsects, wopses, 'ornits, snails an' green caterpillars—ah! an' I shouldn't wonder if potato-fly got amongst 'em, too! why not, I say, have it cleaned out?"

"I like it as it is," responded Walden with cheerful imperturbability, and a smile at the thick-set obstinate-looking figure of his "head man about the place" as Bainton loved to be called. "Have you planted out my phloxes?"

"Planted 'em out every one," was the reply; "likewhich the Delphy Inums. An' I've put enough sweet peas in to supply Covint Garden market, bearin' in mind as 'ow you sed you couldn't have enough on 'em. Sir Morton Pippitt's Lunnon valet come along the day I was a-doin' of it, an' 'e peeps over the 'edge an' 'e sez, sez 'e: 'Weedin' corn, are yer?' 'No, ye gowk,' sez I! 'Ever seen corn at all

'cept in a bin! Mixed wi' thistles, mebbe?' An' then he used a bit of 'is master's or'nary language, which as ye knows, Passon, is chice—partikler chice. 'Evil communications c'rupts good manners' even in a valet wot 'as no more to do than wash an' comb a man like a 'oss, an' pocket fifty pun a year for keepin' of 'is haristocratic master clean. Lor'!—what a wurrld it is!—what a wurrld!"

He had by this time tied up the "Crimson rambler" in orderly fashion, and the Reverend John, stroking his moustache to hide a smile, proceeded to issue various orders according to his usual daily custom.

"Don't forget to plant some mignonette in the west border, Bainton. Not the giant kind,—the odour of the large blooms is rough and coarse compared with that of the smaller variety. Put plenty of the 'common stuff' in,—such mignonette as our grandmothers grew in their gardens, before you Latin-loving horticultural wise-acres began to try for size rather than sweetness."

Bainton drew himself up with a quaint assumption of dignity, and by lifting his head a little more, showed his countenance fully,—a countenance which, though weather-worn and deeply furrowed, was a distinctly intelligent one, shrewd and thoughtful, with sundry little curves of humour lighting up its native expression of saturnine sedateness.

"I suppose y'are alludin' to the F.R.H.'s, Passon," he said. "They all loves Latin, as cats loves milk; howsomever, they never knows 'ow to pronounce it. Likewhich myself not bein' a F.R.H. nor likely to be, I'm bound to confess I dabbles in it a bit,—though there's a chap wot I gets cheap shrubs of, his Latin's worse nor mine, an' 'e's got all the three letters after 'is name. 'Ow did 'e get 'em? By reason of competition in the Chrysanthum Show. Lor'! Henny fool can grow ye a chrysanthum as big as

a cabbage, if that's yer fancy,—that ain't scientific gard'nin'! An' as for the mignonette, I reckon to agree wi' ye, Passon—the size ain't the sweetness, likewhich when I married, I married a small lass, for sez I: 'Little to carry, less to keep!' An' that's true enough, though she's gained in breadth, Lor' love 'er!—wot she never 'ad in heighth. As I was a-sayin', the chap wot I gets shrubs of, reels off 'is Latin like chollops of mud off a garden scraper; but 'e don't understand it while 'e sez it. Jes' for show, bless ye! It all goes down wi' Sir Morton Pippitt, though, for 'e sez, sez 'e: '*My* cabbages are the prize vegetable, grown by Mr. Smogorton of Worcester, F.R.H.' 'E's got it in 'is Catlog! Hor!—hor!—hor! Passon, a bit o' Latin do go down wi' some folk in the gard'nin' line—it do reely now!"

"Talking of Sir Morton Pippitt," said Walden, disregarding his gardener's garrulity, "it seems he has visitors up at the Hall."

"'E 'as so," returned Bainton. "Reg'ler weedy waifs an' strays o' 'umanity, if one may go by out'ard appearance; not a single firm, well-put-down leg among 'em. Mos'ly 'lords' and 'sirs.' Bein' so jes' lately knighted for buildin' a 'ospital at Riversford, out of the proceeds o' bone meltin' into buttons, Sir Morton couldn't a' course be expected to put up wi' a plain 'mister' takin' food wi' 'im."

"Well, well—whoever they are, they want to see the church."

"Seems to me a sight o' folks wants to see the church since ye spent so much money on it, Passon," said Bainton somewhat resentfully. "There oughter be a charge made for entry."

Walden smiled thoughtfully; but there was a small line of vexation on his brow.

"They want to see the church," he repeated, "or rather Sir Morton wants them to 'inspect' the church;"—and then his smile expanded and became a soft mellow laugh. "What a pompous old fellow it is! One would almost think he had restored the church himself, and not only restored it, but built it altogether and endowed it!" He turned to go, then suddenly bethought himself of other gardening matters,—"Bainton, that bare corner near the house must be filled with clematis. The plants are just ready to bed out. And look to the geraniums in the front border. By the way, do you see that straight line along the wall there,—where I am pointing?"

"Yes, sir!" dutifully rejoined Bainton, shading his eyes from the strong sun with one grimy hand.

"Well, plant nothing but hollyhocks there,—as many as you can cram in. We must have a blaze of colour to contrast with those dark yews. See to the jessamine and passion-flowers by the porch; and there is a 'Gloire' rose near the drawing-room window that wants cutting back a bit." He moved a step or two, then again turned: "I shall want you later on in the orchard,—the grass there needs attending to."

A slow grin pervaded Bainton's countenance.

"Ye minds me of the 'Oly Scripter, Passon, ye does reely now!" he said—"Wi' all yer different orders an' idees, y'are behavin' to me like the very moral o' the livin' Wurrd!"

Walden looked amused.

"How do you make that out?"

"Easy enough, sir,—'The Scripter moveth us in sun'ry places'! Hor!—hor!—hor!—" and Bainton burst into a

hoarse chuckle of mirth, entirely delighted with his own witticism, and walked off, not waiting to see whether its effect on his master was one of offence or appreciation. He was pretty sure of his ground, however, for he left John Walden laughing, a laugh that irradiated his face with some of the sunshine stored up in his mind. And the sparkle of mirth still lingered in his eyes as, crossing the lawn and passing the seat where the volume of Epictetus lay, now gratuitously decorated by a couple of pale pink shell-like petals dropped from the apple-blossoms above it, he entered his house, and proceeding to his study sat down and wrote the following brief epistle:

"The Reverend John Walden presents his compliments to Sir Morton Pippitt, and in reply to his note begs to say that, as the church is always open and free, Sir Morton and his friends can 'inspect' it at any time provided no service is in progress."

Putting this in an envelope, he sealed and stamped it. It should go by post, and Sir Morton would receive it next morning. There was no need for a "special messenger," either in the person of Bob Keeley, or in the authorised Puck of the Post Office Messenger-service.

"For there is not the slightest hurry," he said to himself. "It will not hurt Sir Morton to be kept waiting. On the contrary, it will do him good. He had it all his own way in this parish before I came,—but now for the past ten years he has known what it is to 'kick against the pricks' of legitimate Church authority. Legitimate Church authority is a fine thing! Half the Churchmen in the world don't use it, and a goodly portion of the other half misuse it. But when you've got a bumptious, purse-proud, self-satisfied old county snob like Sir Morton Pippitt

to deal with, the pressure of the iron hand should be distinctly exercised under the velvet glove!"

He laughed heartily, throwing back his head with a sense of enjoyment in his laughter. Then, rising from his desk, he turned towards the wide latticed doors of his study, which opened into the garden, and looked out dreamily, as though looking across the world and far beyond it. The sweet mixed warbling of birds, the thousand indistinguishable odours of flowers, made the air both fragrant and musical. The glorious sunshine, the clear blue sky, the rustling of the young leaves, the whispering swish of the warm wind through the shrubberies,—all these influences entered the mind and soul of the man and aroused a keen joy which almost touched the verge of sadness. Life pulsated about him in such waves of creative passion, that his own heart throbbed uneasily with Nature's warm restlessness; and the unanswerable query which, in spite of his high and spiritual faith had often troubled him, came back again hauntingly to his mind,—"Why should Life be made so beautiful only to end in Death?"

This was the Shadow that hung over all things; this was the one darkness he and others of his calling were commissioned to transfuse into light,—this was the one dismal end for all poor human creatures which he, as a minister of the Gospel was bound to try and represent as not an End but a Beginning,—and his soul was moved to profound love and pity as he raised his eyes to the serene heavens and asked himself: "What compensation can all the most eloquent teaching and preaching make to men for the loss of the mere sunshine? Can the vision of a world beyond the grave satisfy the heart so much as this one perfect morning of May!"

An involuntary sigh escaped him. The beating wings of a swallow flying from its nest under the old gabled eaves above him flashed a reflex of quivering light against his eyes; and away in the wide meadow beyond, where the happy cattle wandered up to their fetlocks in cowslips and lush grass, the cuckoo called with cheerful persistence. One of old Chaucer's quaintly worded legends came to his mind,—telling how the courtly knight Arcite,

"Is risen, and looketh on the merrie daye
All for to do his observance to Maye,—
And to the grove of which that I you told,
By aventure his way he gan to hold
To maken him a garland of the greves,
Were it of woodbind or of hawthorn leaves,
And loud he sung against the sunny sheen,—
'O Maye with all thy flowers and thy green,
Right welcome be thou, fairé, freshé Maye!
I hope that I some green here getten may!'"

Smiling at the antique simplicity and freshness of the lines as they rang across his brain like the musical jingle of an old-world spinet, his ears suddenly caught the sound of young voices singing at a distance.

"Here come the children!" he said; and stepping out from his open window into the garden, he again bent his ear to listen. The tremulous voices came nearer and nearer, and words could now be distinguished, breaking through the primitive quavering melody of "The Mayers' Song" known to all the country side since the thirteenth century:

"Remember us poor Mayers all.—
And thus do we begin,
To lead our lives in righteousness,
Or else we die in sin,

We have been rambling all this night,
And almost all this day,
And now returning back again,
We bring you in the May.

The hedges and trees they are so green,
In the sunne's goodly heat,
Our Heavenly Father He watered them
With His Heavenly dew so sweet.

A branch of May we have brought you——"

Here came a pause and the chorus dropped into an uncertain murmur. John Walden heard his garden gates swing back on their hinges, and a shuffling crunch of numerous small feet on the gravel path.

"G'arn, Susie!" cried a shrill boy's voice—"If y'are leadin' us, lead! G'arn!"

A sweet flute-like treble responded to this emphatic adjuration, singing alone, clear and high,

"A branch of May——"

and then all the other voices chimed in:

"A branch of May we have brought you
And at your door it stands,
'Tis but a sprout,
But 'tis budded out
By the work of our Lord's hands!"

And with this, a great crown of crimson and white blossoms, set on a tall, gaily-painted pole and adorned with bright coloured ribbons, came nid-nodding down the box-tree alley to the middle of the lawn opposite Walden's study window, where it was quickly straightened up and held in position by the eager hands of some twenty or thirty children, of all sizes and ages, who, surrounding it

at its base, turned their faces full of shy exultation towards their pastor, still singing, but in more careful time and tune:

"The Heavenly gates are open wide,
Our paths are beaten plain,
And if a man be not too far gone,
He may return again.

The moon shines bright and the stars give light
A little before it is day,
So God bless you all, both great and small,
And send you a merrie May!"

CHAPTER II.

FOR a moment or two Walden found himself smitten by so strong a sense of the mere simple sensuous joy of living, that he could do no more than stand looking in silent admiration at the pretty group of expectant young creatures gathered round the Maypole, and huddled, as it were, under its cumbrous crown of dewy blossoms, which showed vividly against the clear sky, while the long streamers of red, white and blue depending from its summit, trailed on the daisy-sprinkled grass at their feet.

Every little face was familiar and dear to him. That awkward lad, grinning from ear to ear, with a particularly fine sprig of flowering hawthorn in his cap, was Dick Styles;—certainly a very different individual to Chaucer's knight, Arcite, but resembling him in so far that he had evidently gone into the woods early, moved by the same desire: "I hope that I some green here getten may!" That tiny girl, well to the front, with a clean white frock on and no hat to cover her tangle of golden curls, was Baby Hippolyta,—the last, the very last, of the seemingly endless sprouting olive branches of the sexton, Adam Frost. Why the poor child had been doomed to carry the name

of Hippolyta, no one ever knew. When he, Walden, had christened her, he almost doubted whether he had heard the lengthy appellation aright, and ventured to ask the godmother of the occasion to repeat it in a louder voice. Whereupon "Hip—po—ly—ta" was uttered in such strong tones, so thoroughly well enunciated, that he could no longer mistake it, and the helpless infant, screaming lustily, left the simple English baptismal font burdened with a purely Greek designation. She was, however, always called "Ipsie" by her playmates, and even her mother and father, who were entirely responsible for her name in the first instance, found it somewhat weighty for daily utterance and gladly adopted the simpler sobriquet, though the elders of the village generally were rather fond of calling her with much solemn unction: "Baby Hippolyta," as though it were an elaborate joke. Ipsie was one of the loveliest children in the village, and though she was only two-and-a-half years old, she was fully aware of her own charms. She was pushed to the front of the Maypole this morning, merely because she was pretty,—and she knew it. That was why she lifted the extreme edge of her short skirt and put it in her mouth, thereby displaying her fat innocent bare legs extensively, and smiled at the Reverend John Walden out of the uplifted corners of her forget-me-not blue eyes. Then there was Bob Keeley, more or less breathless with excitement, having just got back again from Badsworth Hall, his friend the butcher boy having driven him to and from that place "in a jiffy" as he afterwards described it,—and there was a very sparkling, smiling, vivacious little person of about fifteen, in a lilac cotton frock, who wore a wreath of laburnum on her black curls, no other than Kitty Spruce, generally alluded to in the village as "Bob Keeley's gel;"—and standing near Baby

Hippolyta, or "Ipsie," was the acknowledged young beauty of the place, Susie Prescott, a slip of a lass with a fair Madonna-like face, long chestnut curls and great, dark, soft eyes like pansies filled with dew. Susie had a decided talent for music,—she sang very prettily, and led the village choir, under the guidance of Miss Janet Eden, the schoolmistress. This morning, however, she was risking the duties of conductorship on her own account, and very sweet she looked in her cheap white nunsveiling gown, wearing a bunch of narcissi carelessly set in her hair and carrying a flowering hazel-wand in her hand, with which she beat time for her companions as they followed her bird-like carolling in the "Mayers' Song." But just now all singing had ceased,—and every one of the children had their round eyes fixed on John Walden with a mingling of timidity, affection and awe that was very winning and pretty to behold.

Taking in the whole picture of nature, youth and beauty, as it was set against the pure background of the sky, Walden realised that he was expected to say something,—in fact, he had been called upon to say something every year at this time, but he had never been able to conquer the singular nervousness which always overcame him on such occasions. It is one thing to preach from a pulpit to an assembled congregation who are prepared for orthodoxy and who are ready to listen with more or less patience to the expounding of the same,—but it is quite another to speak to a number of girls and boys all full of mirth and mischief, and as ready for a frolic as a herd of young colts in a meadow. Especially when it happens that most of the girls are pretty, and when, as a clergyman and director of souls, one is conscious that the boys are more or less all in love with the girls,—that one is a

bachelor,—getting on in years too;—and that—chiefest of all—it is May-morning! One may perhaps be conscious of a contraction at the heart,—a tightening of the throat,—even a slight mist before the eyes may tease and perplex such an one—who knows? A flash of lost youth may sting the memory,—a boyish craving for love and sympathy may stir the blood, and may make the gravest parson's speech incoherent,—for after all, even a minister of the Divine is but a man.

At any rate the Reverend John found it difficult to begin. The round forget-me-not eyes of Baby Hippolyta stared into his face with relentless persistency,—the velvet pansy-coloured ones of Susie Prescott smiled confidingly up at him with a bewildering youthfulness and unconsciousness of charm; and the mischief-loving small boys and village yokels who stood grouped against the Maypole like rough fairy foresters guarding magic timber, were, with all the rest of the children, hushed into a breathless expectancy, waiting eagerly for "Passon" to speak. And "Passon" thereupon began,—in the lamest, feeblest, most paternally orthodox manner:

"My dear children——"

"Hooray! Hooray! Three cheers for 'Passon!' Hooray!"

Wild whooping followed, and the Maypole rocked uneasily, and began to slant downward in a drunken fashion, like a convivial giant whom strong wine has made doubtful of his footing.

"Take care, you young rascals!" cried Walden, letting sentiment, orthodoxy and eloquence go to the winds,—"You will have the whole thing down!"

Peals of gay laughter responded, and the nodding mass of bloom was swiftly pulled up and assisted to support its necessary horizontal dignity. But here Baby Hip-

polyta suddenly created a diversion. Moved perhaps by the consciousness of her own beauty, or by the general excitement around her, she suddenly waved a miniature branch of hawthorn and emitted a piercing yell.

"Passon! Tum 'ere! Passon! Tum 'ere!"

There was no possibility of "holding forth" after this. A short address on the brevity of life, as being co-equal with the evanescent joys of a Maypole, would hardly serve, —and a fatherly admonition as to the unbecoming attitude of mendicancy assumed by independent young villagers carrying a great crown of flowers round to every house in the neighbourhood, and demanding pence for the show, would scarcely be popular. Because what did the "Mayers' Song" say:

"The Heavenly gates are opened wide,
Our paths are beaten plain;
And if a man be not too far gone,
He may return again."

And the "Heavenly gates" of Spring being wide open, the Reverend John thought his special path was "beaten plain" for the occasion; and not being "too far gone" either in bigotry or lack of heart, John did what he reverently imagined the Divine Master might have done when He "took a little child and set it in the midst." He obeyed Baby Hippolyta's imperious command, and to her again loudly reiterated "Passon! Tum 'ere!" he sprang forward and caught her up in his arms, kissing her rosy cheeks heartily as he did so. Seated in "high exalted state" upon his shoulder, "Ipsie" became Hippolyta in good earnest, so thoroughly aware was she of her dignity, while, holding her as lightly and buoyantly as he would have held a bird, the Reverend John turned his smiling face on his young parishioners.

"Come along, boys and girls!" he exclaimed,—"Come and plant the Maypole in the big meadow yonder, as you did last year! It is a holiday for us all to-day,—for me as well as for you! It has always been a holiday even before the days when great Elizabeth was Queen of England, and though many dear old customs have fallen into disuse with the changing world, St. Rest has never yet been robbed of its May-day festival! Be thankful for that, children!—and come along;—but move carefully!—keep order,—and sing as you come!"

Whereupon Susie Prescott lifted up her pretty voice again and her hazel-wand *bâton* at the same moment, and started the chorus with the verse:

"We have been rambling all this night,
And almost all this day;
And now returning back again,
We bring you in the May!"

And thus carolling, they passed through the garden moving meadow-wards, Walden at the head of the procession,—and Baby Hippolyta seated on his shoulder, was so elated with the gladsome sights and sounds, that she clasped her chubby arms round "Passon's" neck and kissed him with a fervour that was as fresh and delightful as it was irresistibly comic.

Bainton, making his way along the southern wall of the orchard, to take a "glance round" as he termed it, at the condition of the wall fruit-trees before his master joined him on the usual morning tour of inspection, stopped and drew aside to watch the merry procession winding along under the brown stems dotted with thousands of red buds splitting into pink-and-white bloom; and a slow smile moved the furrows of his face upward in various pleasant lines as he saw the "Passon" leading it with a light step,

carrying the laughing "Ipsie" on his shoulder, and now and again joining in the "Mayers' Song" with a mellow baritone voice that warmed and sustained the whole chorus.

"There 'e goes!" he said half aloud—"Jes' like a boy! —for all the wurrld like a boy! I reckon 'e's got the secret o' never growin' old, for all that 'is 'air's turnin' a bit grey. 'Ow many passons in this 'ere neighbrood would carry the children like that, I wonder? Not one on 'em! —though there's a many to pick an' choose from—a darned sight too many if you axes my opinion! Old Putty Leveson, wi's bobbin' an' 'is bowin's to the east—hor!— hor!—hor!—a fine east 'e's got in 'is mouldy preachin' barn, wi' a whitewashed wall an' a dirty bit o' tinsel fixed up agin it—he wouldn't touch a child o' ourn, to save 'is life—though 'e's got three or four mean, lyin' pryin' brats of 'is own runnin' wild about the place as might jest as well 'ave never been born. And as for Francis Anthony, the 'igh pontiff o' Riversford, wi's big altar-cloak embrided for 'im by all the poor skinny spinsters wot ain't never 'ad no chance to marry—'e'd see all the children blowed to bits under the walls of Jericho to the sound o' the trumpets afore 'e'd touch 'em! Talk o' saints!—I'm not very good at unnerstannin' that kind o' folk, not seein' myself 'owever a saint could manage to get on in this mortal wurrld; but I reckon to think there's a tollable imitation o' the real article in Passon Walden—the jolly sort o' saint, o' coorse,—not the prayin', whinin', snuffin' kind. 'E's been doin' nothin' but good ever since 'e came 'ere, which m'appen partly from 'is not bein' married. If 'e'd gotten a wife, the place would a' been awsome different. Not but wot 'e ain't a bit cranky over 'is flowers 'isself. But I'd rather 'ave 'im fussin' round than a petticut arter me. A petticut at 'ome's enough, an' I ain't

complainin' on it, though it's a bit breezy sometimes,—but a petticut in the gard'nin' line would drive me main wild —it would reely now!"

And still smiling with perfect complacency, he watched the Maypole being carried carefully along the space of grass left open between the fruit trees on either side of the orchard, and followed its bright patch of colour and the children's faces and forms around it, till it entirely disappeared among the thicker green of a clump of elms that bordered the "big meadow," which Walden generally kept clear of both crops and cattle for the benefit of the village sports and pastimes.

He was indeed the only landowner in the district who gave any consideration of this kind to the needs of the people. St. Rest was surrounded on all sides by several large private properties, richly wooded, and possessing many acres of ploughed and pasture land, but there was no public right-of-way across any single one of them, and every field, every woodland path, every tempting dell was rigidly fenced and guarded from "vulgar" intrusion. None of the proprietors of these estates, however, appeared to take the least personal joy or pride in their possessions. They were for the most part away in London for "the season" or abroad "out" of the season,—and their extensive woods appeared to exist chiefly for the preservation of game, reared solely to be shot by a few idle louts of fashion during September and October, and also for the convenience and support of a certain land agent, one Oliver Leach, who cut down fine old timber whenever he needed money, and thought it advisable to pocket the proceeds of such devastation.

Scarcely in one instance out of a hundred did the actual owners of property miss the trees sufficiently to ask

what had become of them. So long as the game was all right, they paid little heed to the rest. The partridges and the pheasants thrived, and so did Mr. Oliver Leach. He enjoyed, however, the greatest unpopularity of any man in the neighbourhood, which was some small comfort to those who believed in the laws of compensation and justice. Bainton was his particular enemy for one, and Bainton's master, John Walden, for another. His long-practised "knavish tricks" and the malicious delight he took in trying to destroy or disfigure the sylvan beauty of the landscape by his brutish ignorance of the art of forestry, combined with his own personal greed, were beginning to be well-known in St. Rest, and it is very certain that on May-morning, when the youngsters of the village were abroad and, to a great extent, had it all their own way, (aided and abetted in that way by the recognised authority of the place, the minister himself,) he would never have dared to show his hard face and stiffly upright figure anywhere, lest he should be unmercifully "guyed" without a chance of rescue or appeal.

With the disappearance of the Maypole into the further meadow, Bainton likewise disappeared on his round of duty, which, as he had declared, moved him "in sundry places," and for a little while the dove-like spirit of Spring brooded in restful silence over the quiet orchard and garden.

The singing of the May-day children had now grown so faint and far as to be scarcely audible,—and the call of the cuckoo shrilling above the plaintive murmur of the wood pigeons, soon absorbed even the echo of the young human voices passing away. A light breeze stirred the tender green grass, shaking down a shower of pink almond bloom as it swept fan-like through the luminous air, —a skylark half lost in the brilliant blue, began to descend

earthwards, flinging out a sparkling fountain of music with every quiver of his jewel-like wings, and away in the sheltered shade of a small hazel copse, the faint fluty notes of a nightingale trembled with a mysterious sweetness suggestive of evening, when the song should be full.

More than an hour elapsed, and no living being entered the seclusion of the parson's garden save Nebbie, the parson's rough Aberdeen terrier, who, appearing suddenly at the open study-window, sniffed at the fair prospect for a moment, and then, stepping out with a leisurely air of proprietorship lay down on the grass in the full sunshine. A wise-looking dog was Nebbie,—though few would have thought that his full name was Nebuchadnezzar. Only the Reverend John knew that. Nebbie was perfectly aware that the children had come with the Maypole, and that his master had accompanied them to the big meadow. Nebbie also knew that presently that same master of his would return again to make the circuit of the garden in the company of Bainton, according to custom,—and as he stretched his four hairy paws out comfortably, and blinked his brown eyes at a portly blackbird prodding in the turf for a worm within a stone's throw of him, he was evidently considering whether it would be worth his while, as an epicurean animal, to escort these two men on their usual round on such a warm pleasant morning. For it was a dog's real lazy day,—a day when merely to lie on the grass was sufficient satisfaction for the canine mind. And Nebbie, yawning extensively, and stretching himself a little more, closed his eyes in a rapture of peace, and stirred his tail slightly with one, two, three mild taps on the soft grass, when a sudden clear whistle caused him to spring up with every hair bristling on end, fore-paws well forward and eyes wide open.

"Nebbie! Nebbie!"

Nebbie was nothing if not thoroughbred, and the voice of his master was, despite all considerations of sleep and sunshine, to him as the voice of the commanding officer to a subaltern. He was off like a shot at a tearing pace, nose down and tail erect, and in less than a minute had scented Walden in the shrubbery, which led by devious windings down from the orchard to the banks of the river Rest, and there finding him, started frantically gambolling round and round him, as though years had parted man and dog from one another, instead of the brief space of an hour. Walden was smiling to himself, and his countenance was extremely pleasant. Nebbie, with the quaint conceit common to pet animals, imagined that the smile was produced specially for him, and continued his wild jumps and barks till his red tongue hung a couple of inches out of his mouth with excess of heat and enthusiasm.

"Nebbie! Nebbie!" said the Reverend John, mildly; "don't make such a noise! Down, lad, down!"

Nebbie subsided, and on reaching the river bank, squatted on his haunches, with his tongue still lolling out, while he watched his master step on a small floating pier attached by iron chains and posts to the land, and bend therefrom over into the clear water, looking anxiously downward to a spot he well knew, where hundreds of rare water-lilies were planted deep in the bed of the stream.

"Nymphea Odorata,"—he murmured, in the yearning tone of a lover addressing his beloved;—"Nymphea Chromatella——now I wonder if I shall see anything of them this year! The Aurora Caroliniana must have been eaten up by water-rats!"

Nebbie uttered a short bark. The faintest whisper of "rats" seriously affected his nerves. He could have told

his master many a harrowing story of those mischievous creatures swimming to and fro in the peaceful flood, tearing with their sharp teeth at the lily roots, and making a horrible havoc of all the most perfect buds of promise. The river Rest itself was so clear and bright that it was difficult to associate rats with its silver flowing,—yet rats there were, hiding among the osiers and sedges, frightening the moorhens and reed-warblers out of their little innocent lives. Nebbie caught and killed them whenever he could,—but he had no particular taste for swimming, and he was on rather "strained relations" with a pair of swans who, with a brood of cygnets kept fierce guard on the opposite bank against all unwelcome intrusion.

His careful examination of the lily beds done, John Walden sprang back again from the pier to the land, and there hesitated a moment. His eyes rested longingly on a light punt, which, running half out of a rustic boathouse, swayed suggestively on the gleaming water.

"I wish I had time,—" he said, half aloud, while Nebbie wagging his tail violently, sat waiting and expectant. The river looked deliciously tempting. The young green of the silver birches drooping above its shining surface, the lights and shadows rippling across it with every breath of air,—the skimming of swallows to and fro,—the hum of bees among the cowslips, thyme and violets that were pushing fragrantly through the clipped turf,—were all so many wordless invitations to him to go forth into the fair freedom of Nature.

"The green trees whispered low and mild,
It was a sound of joy!
They were my playmates when a child,
And rocked me in their arms so wild!
Still they looked on me and smiled
As if I were a boy!"

Such simple lines,—by Longfellow too, the despised of all the Sir Oracles of criticism,—yet coming to Walden's memory suddenly, they touched a chord of vivid emotion.

"And still they whispered soft and low!
Oh, I could not choose but go!"

he hummed half under his breath, and then with a decided movement turned from the winding river towards the house.

"No, Nebbie, it's no use," he said aloud, addressing his four-footed comrade, who thereupon got up reluctantly and began to trot pensively beside him—"We mustn't be selfish. There are a thousand and one things to do. There is dinner to be served to the children at two o'clock —there is Mrs. Keeley to call upon—there are the school accounts to be looked into,—" here he glanced at his watch—"Good Heavens!—how time flies! It is half-past eleven! I shall have to see Bainton later on."

He hurried his steps and was just in sight of his study window, when he was met by his parlourmaid, a neat, trim young woman who rejoiced in the euphonious name of Hester Rockett, and who said as she approached him:

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Spruce."

His genial face fell a little, and he heaved a short sigh.

"Mrs. Spruce? Oh Lord!—I mean, very well! Show her in, Hester. You are sure she wants to see me? Or is it her girl Kitty she is after?"

"She didn't mention Kitty, sir," replied Hester demurely; "she said she wished to see you very particular."

"All right! Show her into my study, and afterwards just go round to the orchard and tell Bainton I will see him when he's had his dinner. I know I sha'n't get off under an hour at least!"

He sighed again, then smiled, and entered the house, Nebbie sedately following. Arrived in his own quiet sanctum, he took off his soft slouched hat and seated himself at his desk with a composed air of patient attention, as the door was opened to admit a matronly-looking lady with a round and florid countenance, clad in a voluminous black gown, and wearing a somewhat aggressive black bonnet, "tipped" well forward, under which her grey hair was plastered so far back as to be scarcely visible. There was a certain aggrieved dignity about her, and a generally superior tone of self-consciousness even in the curtsey which she dropped respectfully, as she returned Walden's kindly nod and glance.

"Good morning, Mrs. Spruce!"

"Good morning, sir! I trust I see you well, sir?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Spruce, I am very well."

"Which is a mercy indeed!" said Mrs. Spruce fervently; "for we never knows from one day to another whether we may be sound or crippled, considering the diseases which now flies in the air with the dust in the common road, as the papers tell us,—and dust is a thing we cannot prevent, do what we may, for the dust is there by the will of the Almighty, Who made us all out of it."

She paused. John Walden smiled and pointed to a chair.

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Spruce?"

"Thank you, kindly, sir!" and Mrs. Spruce accordingly plumped into the seat indicated with evident relief and satisfaction. "I will confess that it is a goodish step to walk on such a warm morning."

"You have come straight from the Manor?" enquired Walden, turning over a few papers on his desk, and wondering within himself when the good woman was going to *unburden herself* of her business.

"Straight from the Manor, sir, yes,—and such a heat and moil I never felt on any May morning, which is most onwholesome, I am sure. A cold May and a warm June is what I prefers myself,—but when you get the cuckoo and the nightingale clicketin together in the woods on the First of May, you can look out for quarrelsome weather at Midsummer, leastways so I have heard my mother often say, and she was considered a wise woman in her time, I do assure you!"

Here Mrs. Spruce untied her bonnet-strings and flung them apart,—she likewise loosened the top button of her collar and heaved a deep sigh. Again the Reverend John smiled, and vaguely balanced a penholder on his forefinger.

"I daresay your mother was quite right, Mrs. Spruce! Indeed, I believe all our mothers were quite right in their day. All the same, I'm glad it's a fine May morning, for the children's sakes. They are all down in the big meadow having a romp together. Your little Kitty is with them, looking as bright as a May blossom herself."

Mrs. Spruce straightened herself up, patted her ample bosom with one hand, and threw her bonnet-strings still further back.

"Kitty's a good lass," she said, "though a bit mettlesome and wild; but I'm not saying anything again her. The Lord forbid that I should run down my own flesh and blood! An' she's better than most gels of her age. I wouldn't grudge her a bit of fun while she's got it in her,—Heaven knows it'll be soon gone out of her when she marries, which nat'rally she will do, sooner or later. Anyhow, she's all I've got,—which is a marvel how the Lord deals with some of us, when you see a little chidester of a woman like *Adam Frost's* wife with fifteen boys and *girls, and me with only* one nesh maid."

Walden was silent. He was not disposed to argue on such marvels of the Lord's way, as resulted in endowing one family with fifteen children, and the other with only a single sprout, such as was accorded to the righteous Jephthah, judge of Israel.

"Howsomever," continued Mrs. Spruce, "Kitty's welcome to jump round the Maypole till she's wore her last pair of boots out, if so be it's your wish, Mr. Walden,—and many thanks to you, sir, for all your kindness to her!"

"Don't mention it, Mrs. Spruce!" said Walden amicably, and then, determining to bring the worthy woman sharply round to the real object of her visit, he gave a side-glance at the clock. "Is there anything you want me to do for you this morning? I'm rather busy——"

"Beggin' your pardon, I'm sure, sir, for troubling you at all!—knowin' as I do that what with the moithering old folks and the maupsing young ones, your 'ands is always full. But when I got the letter this morning, I says to my husband, William—'William,' says I, very loud, for the poor creature's growing so deaf that by-and-by I shall be usin' a p'lice whistle to make him 'ear me—'William,' says I, 'there is only one man in this village who's got the right to give advice when advice is asked for. Of course there's no call for us to follow advice, even when we gets it,—howsomever, it's only respectable for decent church-going folks to see the minister of the parish whenever there's any fear of our makin' a slip of our souls and goin' wrong. Therefore, William,' says I, shaking him by the arm to make the poor silly fool understand me, 'it's to Passon Walden I'm goin' this mornin' with this letter,—to Passon Walden, d'ye 'ear?' And he nodded his head wise-like, for all the world as though there were a bit of sense in it, (which there ain't), and agrees with

me;—for the Lord knows, if William doesn't, that it may make an awsome change for him as well as for me. And I do confess I've been took back."

Following as best he could the entangled thread of the estimable lady's discourse, Walden grasped the fact, albeit vaguely, that some unexpected letter with unexpected news in it had arrived to trouble the Spruces' domestic peace. Suppressing a slight yawn, he endeavoured to assume the proper show of interest which every village parson is expected to display on the shortest notice concerning any subject, from the birth of the latest baby parishioner, to the death of the earliest sucking pig.

"I'm sorry you're in trouble, Mrs. Spruce," he said kindly. "What letter are you speaking of? You see I don't quite understand——"

"Which it's not to be expected you should, sir!" replied Mrs. Spruce with an air of triumph,—"Considerin' as you wer'n't here when she left, and the Manor has been what you may call a 'stately 'ome of England' deserted as most stately 'omes are, for more'n ten years, you couldn't be expected to understand!"

The Reverend John looked as he felt, completely mystified. He "wasn't here when she left." Who was "she?" With all his naturally sweet temper he began to feel slightly irritated.

"Really, Mrs. Spruce," he said, endeavouring to throw an inflection of sternness into his mellow voice, "I must ask you to explain matters a little more clearly. I know that the Manor has been practically shut up ever since I've been here,—that you are the housekeeper in charge, and that your husband is woodman or forester there,—but beyond this I know nothing. So you must not talk in riddles, Mrs. Spruce,"—here his kind smile shone out

again—"Even as a boy I was never good at guessing them! And I am getting old now."

"So you are, sir—so you are!" agreed Mrs. Spruce sympathetically. "And 'tis a shame for me to come worrying of you,—for no one more truly than myself can feel pity for the weariness of the flesh, when 'tis just a burden to the bones and no pleasure in the carrying of it, though you don't put much of it on, Passon Walden, you don't, I do assure you! But it's Gospel truth that some folks wears thin like a knife, while others wears thick like a pig, and there is no stopping them,—either way bein' the Lord's will,—but I'm feelin' real okkard myself to have put you about, Passon, only as I said, I've been took back, —and here's the letter, sir, which if you will kindly glance your hi over, you will tell me whether I've done the right thing to call on my way down here and get in a couple of scrubbers at eighteen-pence a day, which is dear, but they won't come for less, jest to get some of the rough dirt off the floors afore polishin', which polishin' will have to be done whether we will or no, for the boards are solid oak, and bein' ancient take the shine quickly, which is a mercy, for this day week is none too far off, seein' all that's put upon me suddint."

Here, being short of breath, she paused, and fumbling in a large black calico pocket which hung loosely at her side, attached to her ample waist by a string, she drew out with great care a rather large, square-looking missive, and then rising from her chair with much fluttering of her black gown and mysterious creaking sound, as of tight under-wear strained to breaking point, she held it out toward Walden, who had, during her last oratorical outburst, unconsciously put his hand to his head in a daze of bewilderment.

"There is the letter, sir," she continued, in the tone of one who should say: 'There is the warrant for execution' —"'Short and sweet,' as the farmer's wife said when she ate the pig's tail what dropped off while the animal was a-roastin.'"

Allowing this brilliant simile to pass without comment, Walden took the thick, creamy-white object she offered and found himself considering it with a curious disfavour. It was a strictly "fashionable" make of envelope, and was addressed in a particularly bold and assertive handwriting to

MRS. SPRUCE,
Housekeeper,
Abbot's Manor,
St. Rest.

Opening it, the Reverend John read as follows:

"Miss Vancourt begs to inform Mrs. Spruce that she will arrive at Abbot's Manor on the 7th inst., to remain there in residence. Mrs. Spruce is requested to engage the necessary household servants, as Miss Vancourt will bring none except the groom in charge of her two hunters."

Over and over again Walden read this curt and commonplace note, with a sense of irritation which he knew was perfectly absurd, but which, nevertheless, defied all reason. The paper on which it was written was thick and satiny,—and there was a faint artificial odour of violets about it which annoyed him. He hated scented notepaper. Deliberately he replaced it in its envelope, and holding it for a moment as he again studied the superscription, he addressed the expectant Mrs. Spruce, who had re-seated herself and was waiting for him to speak.

"Well, Mrs. Spruce, I don't think you need any advice from me on such a simple matter as this," he said slowly,

"Your duty is quite plain. You must obey orders. Miss Vancourt is, I suppose, the mistress of Abbot's Manor?"

"She is, sir,—of course it all belongs to Miss Maryllia——"

"Miss——what?" interrupted Walden, with a sudden lightening of his dark blue eyes.

"Maryllia, sir. It is a kind of family name, pronounced 'Ma—rill—yer,'" explained Mrs. Spruce with considerable pomposity. "Many folks never gets it right—it wants knowledge and practice. But if you remember the pictures in the gallery at the Manor, sir, you may call to mind one of the ancestresses of the Vancourts, painted in a vi'let velvet ridin' dress and holdin' a huntin' crop, and the name underneath is 'Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaigncourt' and it was after her that the old Squire called his daughter Maryllia, rollin' the two fust names, Mary Elia, into one, as it were, just to make a name what none of his forebears had ever had. He was a queer man, the old Squire —he wouldn't a-cared whether the name was Christian or heathen."

"I suppose not," said the Reverend John carelessly, rising and pushing back his chair with a slightly impatient gesture; whereupon Mrs. Spruce rose too and stood 'at attention', her loosened bonnet-strings flying and her large black calico pocket well in evidence to the front of her skirt.

"Here's your letter, Mrs. Spruce—" and as she took it from his hand with a curtsey he continued: "There is evidently nothing for it but to get the house in order by the day appointed and do your best to please the lady. I can quite understand that you feel a little worried at having to prepare everything so quickly and unexpectedly, —but after all, you must have often thought that Miss

Vancourt's return to her old home was likely to happen at any time."

"Which I never did, sir!" declared Mrs. Spruce emphatically. "No, sir, never! For when the old Squire died, she was jest a slip of fifteen and her uncle, the Squire's own twin brother, what had married an American heiress with somethin' like a hundred million of money, so I'm told, took her straight away and adopted her like, and the reg'ler pay for keepin' up the Manor and grounds has been sent to us through a Bank, and so far we've got nothin' to complain of bein' all strictly honourable both ways, but of Miss Vancourt we never heard a thing. And Mr. Oliver Leach he is the agent of the property, and he ain't never said a word,—and we think, me and my husband, that he don't know nothin' of her comin' back, and should we tell him, sir? Or would you reckon that we'd better keep a still tongue in our heads till she do come? For there's no knowin' why or wherefore she's comin',—though we did hear her poor uncle died two years ago, and we wondered where she and her aunt with the hundred million was got to—but mebbe she'll change her mind and not come, after all?"

"I should certainly not count upon that, if I were you, Mrs. Spruce," said Walden decisively. "Your business is to keep everything in order for the lady's arrival; but I don't think,—I really don't think, you are at all bound to inform Mr. Oliver Leach of the matter. He will no doubt find out for himself, or receive his orders direct from Miss Vancourt." Here he paused. "How old did you say she was when she went away from home?"

"Fifteen, sir. That was nigh eleven years ago,—just one week after the Squire's funeral, and a year afore you came here, sir. She's gettin' on for seven-and-twenty now."

"Quite a woman, then," said Walden lightly; "old enough to know her own mind at any rate. Do you remember her?"

"Perfectly well, sir,—a little flitterin' creature all eyes and hair, with a saucy way of tossin' her curls about, and a trick of singin' and shoutin' all over the place. She used to climb the pine trees and sit in them and pelt her father with the cones. Oh, yes, sir, she was a terrible child to rule, and it's Gospel truth there was no ruling her, for the governesses came and went like the seasons, one in, t'other out. Aye, but the Lord knows I'll never forget the scream she gave when the Squire was brought home from the hunting field stone dead!"

Here John Walden turned his head towards her with an air of more interest than he had yet shown.

"Ah!—How was that?" he enquired.

"He was killed jumpin' a fence;" went on Mrs. Spruce. "A fine, handsome gentleman,—they say he'd been wild in his youth; anyhow he got married in London to a great Court beauty, so I've been told. And after the wedding, they went travelling all over the world for a year and a half, and just when they was expected 'ome Mrs. Vancourt died with the birth of the child, and he and the baby and the nurses all came back here and he never stirred away again himself till death took him at full gallop,—which is 'ow he always wished to die. But poor Miss Maryllia—" And Mrs. Spruce sighed dolefully—"'Twas hard on her, seein' him ride off so gay and well and cheery in the early mornin' to be brought home afore noon a corpse! Aye, it was an awsome visitation of the Lord! Often when the wind goes wimblin' through the pines near the house I think I 'ear her shriek now,—aye, sir!—it was like the cry of somethin' as was havin' its heart tore out!"

Walden stood very silent, listening. This narrative was new to him, and even Mrs. Spruce's manner of relating it was not without a certain rough eloquence. The ancient history of the Vancourts he knew as well as he knew the priceless archæological value of their old Manor-house as a perfect gem of unspoilt Tudor architecture,—but though he had traced the descent of the family from Robert Priaulx de Vaignecourt of the twelfth century and his brother Osmonde Priaulx de Vaignecourt who had, it was rumoured, founded a monastery in the neighbourhood, and had died during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he had ceased to follow the genealogical tree with much attention or interest when the old Norman name of De Vaignecourt had degenerated into De Vincourt and finally in the time of James I. had settled down into Vancourt. Yet there was a touch of old-world tragedy in Mrs. Spruce's modern history of the young girl's shriek when she found herself suddenly fatherless on that fatal hunting morning.

"And now," continued Mrs. Spruce, coaxing one bonnet-string at a time off each portly shoulder with considerable difficulty; "I suppose I must be goin', Passon Walden, and thank you kindly for all! It's a great weight off my mind to have told you just what's 'appened, an' the changes likely to come off, and I do assure you I'm of your opinion, Passon, in letting Oliver Leach shift for himself, for if so be Miss Vancourt has the will of her own she had when she was a gel, I shouldn't wonder if there was rough times in store for him! But the Lord only knows what may chance to all of us!" and here she heaved another dismal sigh as she tied the refractory bonnet-strings into a bow under her fat chin. "It's right-down sinful of me to be wishin' rough times to any man, seein' I'm likely in for them myself, for a person's bound to be different at nigh seven-

and-twenty to what she was at fifteen, and the modern ways of leddies ain't old ways, the Lord be merciful to us all! And I do confess, Passon, it's a bit upsettin' at my time of life to think as how I've lived in Abbot's Manor all these years, and now for all I can tell, me and William may have to shift. And where we'll go, the Lord only knows!"

"Now don't anticipate misfortune, Mrs. Spruce!" said Walden, beginning to shake off the indescribable feeling of annoyance against which he had been fighting for the past few minutes and resuming his usual quiet air of cheerfulness; "Miss Vancourt is not likely to dismiss you unless you offend her. The great thing is to avoid offence,—and to do even more than your strict duty in making her old home look its best and brightest for her return and——" Here he hesitated for a moment, then went on——"Of course if I can do anything to help you, I will."

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure most kindly," said Mrs. Spruce curtseying two or three times in a voluminous overflow of gratitude. "I shall take the liberty of asking you to step up during the week, to see how things appears to you yourself. And as for servants, there's no gels old enough at the school for servants, so I'll be goin' to Riversford with the carrier's cart to-morrow to see what I can do. Ah, it's an awsome mission I'm goin' on; there ain't no gels to be got of the old kind, as far as I can make out. They all wants to be fine leddies nowadays and marry 'Merican millionaires."

"Not quite so bad as that, I think, Mrs. Spruce!" laughed Walden, holding open the door of the study for her to pass out, as a broad hint that the interview must be considered at an end,—"There are plenty of good, industrious, intelligent girls in England ready and willing

to enter domestic service, if we make it worth their while,—and I'm sure no one can teach *you* anything in that line! Good morning, Mrs. Spruce!"

"Good morning, sir,—and you'll step up to the Manor when convenient some afternoon?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. Whenever convenient to yourself, Mrs. Spruce."

Mrs. Spruce curtseyed again at the respect for her own importance which was implied in Walden's last sentence, and slowly sidled out, the "Passon" watching her with a smile as she trotted down the passage from his study to a door which led to the kitchen and basement.

"Now she'll go and tell all her story again to Hester and the cook," he said to himself. "And how she will enjoy herself to be sure! Bless the woman, what a tongue she has! No wonder her husband is deaf!"

He re-seated himself at his desk, and taking up a bundle of accounts connected with the church and the school, tried to fix his attention on them, but in vain. His mind wandered. He was obliged to own to himself that he was unreasonably irritated at the news that Abbot's Manor, which had been so long a sort of unoccupied "show" house, was again to be inhabited,—and by one who was its rightful owner too. Ever since he had bought the living of St. Rest he had been accustomed to take many solitary walks through the lovely woods surrounding the Vancourts' residence, without any fear of being considered a trespasser,—and he had even strolled through the wide, old-fashioned gardens with as little restraint as though they had belonged to himself, Mrs. Spruce the housekeeper being the last person in the world to forbid her minister to enter wherever he would. He had passed long hours of delightful research in the old library, and

many afternoons of meditation in the picture gallery, where the portrait of the lady in the "vi'let velvet," Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt, had often caught his eye and charmed his fancy when the setting sun had illumined its rich colouring and had given life to the face, half-petulant, half-sweet, which pouted forth from the old canvas like a rose with light on its petals. Now all these pleasant rambles were finished. The mistress of Abbot's Manor would certainly object to a wandering parson in her house and grounds. Probably she was a very imperious, disagreeable young woman,—full of the light scorn, lack of sentiment and cheap atheism common to the "smart" lady of the decadent period, and if it were true that she had been for so many years in the charge of an American aunt with a "hundred millions," the chances were ten to one that she would be an exceedingly unpleasant neighbour.

He gave a short impatient sigh.

"Ah, well! I only hope she will put a stop to the felling of the fine old trees in her domain," he said half aloud,—"If no one else in the village has the pluck to draw her attention to the depredations of Oliver Leach, I will. But, so far as other matters go,—my walks in the Manor woods are ended! yes, Nebbie!" and he gently patted the head of the faithful animal, who, with inborn sagacity instinctively guessing that his master was somewhat annoyed, was clambering with caressing forepaws against his knee. "Our rambles by the big elms and silvery birches and under the beautiful tall pines are over, Nebbie! and we shouldn't be human if we wer'n't just a trifle sorry! Sir Morton Pippitt is bad enough as a neighbour, but he's a good three miles off at Badsworth Hall, thank Heaven!—whereas Abbot's Manor is but a quarter of an hour's walk from this gate. We've had pleasant

times in the dear old-fashioned gardens, Nebbie, you and I, but it's all over! The mistress of the Manor is coming home,—and I'm positively certain, Nebbie,—yes, old boy! —positively certain that we shall both detest her."

CHAPTER III.

WHEN England's great Queen, Victoria the Good, was still enjoying her first happy years of wedded life, and society, under her gentle sway, was less ostentatious and much more sincere in its code of ethics than it is nowadays, the village of St. Rest, together with the adjacent post-town of Riversford, enjoyed considerable importance in county chronicles. Very great "county personages" were daily to be seen comporting themselves quite simply among their own tenantry, and the Riversford Hunt Ball annually gathered together a veritable galaxy of "fair women and brave men" who loved their ancestral homes better than all the dazzle and movement of town, and who possessed for the most part that "sweet content" which gives strength to the body and elasticity to the mind. There was then a natural gaiety and spontaneous cheerfulness in English country life that made such a life good for human happiness; and the jolly Squires who with their "dames" kept open house and celebrated Harvest Home and Christmas Festival with all the buoyancy and vigour of a sane and healthful manhood undeteriorated by any sickly taint of morbid pessimism and indifferent inertia, were the beneficent rulers of a merrier rural population than has ever been seen since their day. Squire Vancourt the elder, grandfather of the present heiress of Abbot's Manor, had been a splendid specimen of "the fine old English gentleman, all of the

olden time," and his wife, one of the handsomest, as well as one of the kindest-hearted women that ever lived, had been justly proud of her husband, devoted to her children, and a true friend and benefactress to the neighbourhood. Her four sons, two of whom were twins, and all great strapping lads, built on their vigorous father's model, were considered the best-looking young men in the county, and by their fond mother were judged as the best-hearted; but, as it often happens, Nature was freakish in their regard, and turned them all out wild colts of a baser breed than might have been expected from their unsullied parentage. The eldest took to hard drinking and was killed at steeple-chasing; the second was drowned while bathing; one of the twins, named Frederick, the younger by a few minutes, after nearly falling into unnameable depths of degradation by gambling with certain "noble and exalted" personages of renown, saved himself, as it were, by the skin of his teeth, through marriage with a rich American girl whose father was blessed with unlimited oil-mines. He was thereby enabled to wallow in wealth with an impaired digestion and shattered nervous power, while capricious Fate played him her usual trick in her usual way by denying him any heirs to his married millions. His first-born brother, Robert, wedded for love, and chose as his mate a beautiful girl without a penny, whose grace and charm had dazzled the London world of fashion for about two seasons, and she had died at the age of twenty in giving birth to her first child, the girl whom her father had named Maryllia. All these chances and changes of life, however, occurring to the leading family of the neighbourhood had left very little mark on St. Rest, which drowsed under the light shadow of the eastern hills by its clear flowing river, very much

as it had always drowsed in the old days, and very much as it would always do even if London and Paris were consumed by unsuspected volcanoes. The memory of the first "old Squire;"—who died peacefully in his bed all alone, his wife having passed away two years before him, and his two living twin sons being absent,—was frequently mixed with stories of the other "old Squire" Robert, the elder twin, who was killed in the hunting field,—and indeed it often happened that some of the more ancient and garrulous villagers were not at all sure as to which was which. The Manor had been shut up for ten years,—the Manor "family" had not been heard of during all that period, and the tenantry's recollection of their late landlord, as well as of his one daughter, was more vague and confused than authentic. The place had been "managed" and the cottage rents collected by the detested agent Oliver Leach, a fact which did not sweeten such remembrance of the Vancourts as still existed in the minds of the people. However, nothing in the general aspect and mental attitude of the village had altered very much since the early thirties, except the church. That from a mere ruin, had under John Walden's incumbency become a gem of architecture, so unique and perfect as to be the wonder and admiration of all who beheld it, and whereas in the early Victorian reign a few people stopped at Riversford because it was a county town and because there was an inn there where they could put up their horses, so a few people now went to St. Rest, because there was a church there worth looking at. They came by train to Riversford where the railway line stopped, and then took carriage or cycled the seven miles between that town and St. Rest to see the church; and having seen it, promptly went back again. For one of

the great charms of the little village hidden under the hills was that no tourist could stay a night in it, unless he or she took one spare room—there was only one—at the small public-house which sneaked away up round a corner of the street under an archway of ivy and pushed its old gables through the dark enshrouding leaves with a half-surprised, half propitiatory air as though somewhat ashamed of its own existence. With the exception of this one room in this one public-house, there was no accommodation for visitors. Never will the rash cyclist who ventured once to appeal to the sexton's wife for rooms in her cottage, forget the brusqueness of his reception:

"Rooms!" And Mrs. Frost, setting her arms well akimbo, surveyed the enquirer scornfully through an open doorway, rendered doubly inviting by the wealth of roses clambering round it. "Be off, young man! Where was you a-comin' to? D'ye think a woman wi' fifteen great boys and girls in an' out of the 'ouse all day, 'as rooms for payin' guests?" And here Mrs. Frost, snorting at the air in irrepressible disdain, actually snapped her fingers in her would-be lodger's face. "Rooms indeed! Go to Brighting!"

Whereupon the abashed wheelman went,—whether to Brighton, as the irate lady suggested, or to a warmer place unmentionable, history sayeth not. But St. Rest remained, as its name implied, restful,—and the barbaric yell of the cheap tripper, together with the equally barbaric scream of the cheap tripper's "young lady" echoed chiefly through modernised and vulgarised Riversford, where there were tea-rooms and stuffy eating-houses and bad open-air concerts, such as trippers, and their "ladies" delight in,—and seldom disturbed the tranquil charm of

the tiny mediæval village dear to a certain few scholars, poets and antiquarians who, through John Walden, had gradually become acquainted with this "priceless bit" as they termed it, of real "old" England and who almost feared to mention its existence even in a whisper, lest it should be "swarmed over" by enquiring Yankees, searching for those everlasting ancestors who all managed so cleverly to cross the sea together in one boat, the *Mayflower*. There is something truly pathetic as well as droll in the anxiety of every true American to prove himself or herself an offshoot from some old British root of honour or nobility. It would be cruel to laugh at this instinct, for after all it is only the passionate longing of the Prodigal Son who, having eaten of the husks that the swine did eat, experienced such an indigestion at last, that he said "I will arise and go to my father." And it is quite possible that an aspiring Trans-Atlantic millionaire yearning for descent more than dollars, would have managed to find tracks of a *Mayflower* pedigree in St. Rest, a place of such antiquity as to be able to boast a chivalric "roll of honour" once kept in the private museum at Badsworth Hall before the Badsworth family became extinct, but now, thanks to John Walden, rescued from the modern clutch of the Hall's present proprietor, Sir Morton Pippitt, and carefully preserved in an iron box locked up in the church, along with other documents of value belonging to the neighbourhood. On this roll were inscribed the names of such English gentlemen once resident in the district, who had held certain possessions in France at the accession of Henry II. in 1154. Besides this "roll of honour" there were other valuable records having to do with the Anglo-French campaigns in the time of King John, and much concerning those persons

of St. Rest and Riversford who took part in the Wars of the Barons. Whatever there was of curious or interesting matter respecting the village and its surroundings had been patiently ferreted out by John Walden, who had purchased the living partly because he knew it to be a veritable mine for antiquarian research and one likely to afford him inexhaustible occupation and delight. But there were, of course, other reasons for his settling down in so remote a spot far from the busy haunts of men,—reasons which, to his own mind, were perfectly natural and simple, though on account of his innate habit of reticence, and disinclination to explain his motives to others, they were by some supposed to be mysterious. In his youth he had been one of the most brilliant and promising of University scholars, and all those who had assisted to fit him for his career in the Church, had expected great things of him. Some said he would be a Bishop before he was thirty; others considered that he would probably content himself with being the most intellectual and incisive preacher of his time. But he turned out to be neither one nor the other. A certain Henry Arthur Brent, his fellow student at College and five years his senior, had, with apparent ease, outstripped him in the race for honour, though lacking in all such exceptional mental ability as he possessed, and was now Bishop of the very diocese in which he had his little living. University men said he had "stood aside" in order to allow Brent to press more swiftly forward, but though this was a perfectly natural supposition on the part of those who knew something of Walden's character, it was not correct. Walden at that time had only one object in life,—and this was to secure such name and fame, together with *such* worldly success as might delight and satisfy the only

relative he had in the world, his sister, a beautiful and intelligent woman, full of an almost maternal tenderness for him, and a sweet resignation to her own sad lot, which made her the victim of a slow and incurable disease. So long as she lived, her brother threw himself into his work with intensity and ardour; but when she died that impulse withered, as it were, at its very root. The world became empty for him, and he felt that from henceforth he would be utterly companionless. For what he had seen of modern women, modern marriage and modern ways of life, did not tempt him to rashly seek refuge for his heart's solitude in matrimony. Almost immediately following the loss of his sister, an uncle of whom he had known very little, died suddenly, leaving him a considerably large fortune. As soon as he came into possession of this unexpected wealth, he disappeared at once from the scene of his former labours,—the pretty old house in the University town, with its great cedars sloping to the river and its hallowed memories of the sister he had so dearly loved, was sold by private treaty,—his voice was heard no more in London pulpits, where it had begun to carry weight and influence,—and he managed to obtain the then vacant and obscure living of St. Rest, the purchase of the advowson being effected, so it was said, privately through the good offices of his quondam college friend, Bishop Brent. And at St. Rest he had remained, apparently well contented with the very simple and monotonous round of duty it offered. When he had first arrived there he found that the church consisted of some thick stone walls of the early Norman period, built on a cruciform plan, the stones being all uniformly wrought and close-jointed,—together with a beautiful ruined chancel divided from the main body of the building by massive

columns, which supported on their capitals the fragments of lofty arches indicative of an architectural transition from the Norman to the Early Pointed English style. There were also the hollow slits of several lancet windows, and one almost perfect pierced circular window to the east, elaborately carved with traceries of natural fruit and foliage, which were scarcely injured by the devastating mark of time. But rough and sacrilegious hands had been at work to spoil and deface the classic remains of the time-worn edifice, and some of the lancet windows had been actually hewn out and widened to admit of the insertion of modern timber props which awkwardly supported a hideous galvanised iron roof, on the top of which was erected a kind of tin hen-coop in which a sharp bell clanged with irritating rapidity for Sunday service. Outside, the building was thus rendered grotesquely incongruous,—inside it was almost blasphemous in its rank ugliness. There were several rows of narrow pews made of common painted deal,—there was a brown stone font and a light pine-wood pulpit—a small harmonium stood in one corner, festooned by a faded red woollen curtain, and a general air of the cheap upholsterer and jerry-builder hovered over the whole concern. And the new incumbent, gazing aghast at the scene, was triumphantly informed that "Sir Morton Pippitt had been generous enough to roof and 'restore' the church in this artistic manner out of his own pocket, for the comfort of the villagers," and moreover that he actually condescended to attend Divine service under the galvanised iron roof which he had so liberally erected. Nay, it had been even known that Sir Morton had on one or two occasions himself read the Lessons in the absence of the late rector, who was *subject to* sore throats and was constantly compelled to

call in outside assistance. To all this information John Walden said nothing. He was not concerned with Sir Morton Pippitt or any other county magnate in the management of his own affairs. A fortnight after his arrival he quietly announced to his congregation that the church was about to be entirely restored according to its original lines of architecture, and that a temporary building would be erected on his, Walden's, own land for the accommodation of the people during such time as the restoration should be in progress. This announcement brought about Walden's first acquaintance with his richest neighbour, Sir Morton Pippitt. That gentleman having been accustomed to have his own way in everything concerning St. Rest, for a considerable time, straightway wrote, expressing his "surprise and indignation" at the mere assumption that any restoration was required for the church beyond what he, Sir Morton, had effected at his own expense. The number of parishioners was exceedingly small,—too small to warrant any further expenditure for enlarging a place of worship which, (considering that some years ago it had been a mere roofless ruin, and that the people had been compelled to walk or drive to Riversford in order to attend church at all on Sundays) Sir Morton thought was now very comfortable and satisfactory. In fact, Sir Morton concluded, "Mr. Walden would be very ill-advised if he made any attempt to raise money for such a useless purpose as the 'entire restoration' of the church of St. Rest, and Mr. Walden might as well be at once made aware that Sir Morton himself would not give a penny towards it." To which somewhat rambling and heated epistle John Walden replied with civil stiffness as follows:

"The Rev. John Walden presents his compliments to

Sir Morton Pippitt, and in answer to his letter begs to say that he has no intention of raising any subscription to defray the cost of restoring the church, which in its present condition is totally unfit for Divine service. Having secured the living, Mr. Walden will make the restoration the object of his own personal care, and will also be pleased to reimburse Sir Morton Pippitt for any outlay to which he may have been put in erecting the galvanised roof and other accessories for the immediate convenience of the parishioners who have, he understands, already expressed their sense of obligation to Sir Morton for kindly providing them with such temporary shelter from the changes of the weather as seemed to be humanely necessary."

This calm epistle when received at Badsworth Hall, had the effect of a sudden stiff breeze on the surface of hitherto quiet waters. Sir Morton Pippitt in a brand-new tweed suit surmounted by a very high, clean, stiff shirt-collar, was sitting at breakfast in what was formerly known as the "great Refectory," a memory of the days when Badsworth had been a large and important monastery, but which was now turned into a modern-antique dining-room,—and as he read, with the aid of his gold-rimmed spectacles, the curt, chill, severely polite letter of the "new parson" he flew into a sudden violent passion.

"Damn the fellow!" he spluttered, jumping up in haste and striking out an arm towards the very direction in which a mild young footman was just approaching him with a bottle of Worcester sauce on a tray,—"Damn him!"

The footman staggered back in terror, and the Worcester sauce reeled over drunkenly onto the carpet.

"There you go, you clumsy, gaping idiot!" roared Sir Morton, growing purple with increasing fury. "Tabitha!"

And here he whirled round on his only daughter, an angular and severely-visaged spinster. "Look at this fool! —this staring ape! All the sauce on the carpet! Wish he had to pay for it! He'll take an hour to get a cloth and wipe it up! Why did you engage such a damned ass, eh?"

Miss Tabitha preserved a prudent silence, seeing that the butler, a pensive-looking personage with a resigned-to-ill-usage demeanour, was already engaged in assisting the hapless footman to remove the remains of the spilt condiment from the offended gaze of his irate master.

"Like his damned impudence!" broke out Sir Morton again, resuming with some reluctance his seat at the breakfast-table, and chopping at the fried bacon on his plate till the harder bits flew far and wide,—'Happy to reimburse me!'—the snivelling puppy! Why the devil he was allowed to sneak into this living, I don't know! The private purchase of advowsons is a scandal—a disgraceful scandal! Any Tom, Dick or Harry can get a friend to buy him a benefice in which to make himself a nuisance! Done under the rose,—and called a 'presentation!' All humbug and hypocrisy! That's why we get impudent dogs like this beast Walden settling down in a neighbourhood whether we like it or not!"

Miss Tabitha munched some toast slowly with a delicate regard for her front teeth, which had cost money. There was no one in the room to suggest to Sir Morton that it was a pity some law was not in progress to prevent the purchase of historic houses by vulgar and illiterate persons of no family;—which would have been far more a benefit to the land at large than the suppression of privately purchased benefices. For the chances were ten to one that the ordained minister, who, by his own choice

secured a Church living for himself, was likely at least to be a well-educated gentleman, interested in the work he had himself elected to do,—whereas the illiterate individual who bought an historic house simply for self-glorification, would probably be no more than a mere petty and pompous tyrant over the district which that particular house dominated. Badsworth Hall, a fine sixteenth-century pile, had, through the reckless racing and gambling propensities of the last heir, fallen into the hands of the Jews. On the fortunate demise of the young gentleman who had brought it to this untimely end, it was put up for sale with all its contents. And Sir Morton Pippitt,—a rich colonial, whose forebears were entirely undistinguished, but who had made a large fortune by his bone-melting business, which converted the hoofs, horns and bones of defunct animals into a convenient mixture wherewith to make buttons and other useful articles of hardware, bought it, as the saying goes, "for a mere song." Through his easy purchase he became possessed of the Badsworth ancestry, as shown in their pictures hanging on the dining-room walls and in the long oak-panelled picture gallery. Lady Madeline Badsworth, famous for her beauty in some remote and chivalrous past, gazed down at Sir Morton while he sat at meals, suggesting to the imaginative beholder a world of scorn in her lovely painted eyes,—and a heroic young Badsworth who had perished at the battle of Marston Moor, stood proudly out of one of the dark canvases, his gauntleted hand on the hilt of his sword and a smile of pained wrath on his lips, as one who should say, beholding the new possessor of his ancient home—"To such base uses must we come at last!" Surrounded by gold-framed Badsworths, young and old, Sir Morton ate his fried bacon and "swilled" his tea, with a considerable noise in swal-

lowing, getting gradually redder in the face as he proceeded with his meal. He was by no means a bad-looking old gentleman,—his sixty years sat lightly upon his broad shoulders, and he was tall and well set-up, though somewhat too stout in what may be politely called the "lower chest" direction. His face was plump, florid and clean-shaven, and what hair he still possessed was of a pleasantly-bright silver hue. The first impression he created was always one of kindness and benevolence,—the hearts of women especially invariably went out to him, and murmurs of "What a dear old man!" and "What a darling old man!" frequently escaped lips feminine in softest accents. He was very courtly to women,—when he was not rude; and very kind to the poor,—when he was not mean. His moods were fluctuating; his rages violent; his temper obstinate. When he did not succeed in getting his own way, his petulant sulks resembled those of a spoilt child put in a corner, only they lasted longer. There was one shop in Riversford which he had not entered for ten years, because its owner had ventured, with trembling respect, to contradict him on a small matter. Occasionally he could be quite the "dear, darling old man" his lady admirers judged him to be,—but after all, his servants knew him best. To them, "Sir Morton was a caution." And that is precisely what he was; the definition entirely summed up his character. He had one great passion,—the desire to make himself "the" most important person in the county, and to be written about in the local paper, a hazy and often ungrammatical organ called *The Riversford Gazette*. If Sir Morton had a pig killed, the fact was duly notified to an admiring populace in the *Riversford Gazette*. If he took a prize in cabbages at the local vegetable and flower show, the *Riversford Gazette* had a column about

it. If he gave a tennis-party, there were two columns describing all the dresses of the ladies, the prowess of the "champions" and the "striking and jovial personality" of Sir Morton Pippitt. And if the fact of that "striking and jovial personality" were not properly insisted upon, Sir Morton went himself to see the editor of the *Riversford Gazette*, an uneasy, timorous little man,—and nearly frightened him into fits. He had asserted himself in this kind of autocratic fashion ever since he had purchased Badsworth, when he was still in his forties,—and it may be well imagined that at the age of sixty he was not prepared to be thwarted, even in a matter wherein he had no real concern. The former rector of St. Rest, an ailing, nervous and exceedingly poor man, with a large family to keep, had been only too glad and ready to do anything Sir Morton Pippitt wished, for the sake of being invited to dine at the Hall once a week,—it was therefore a very unexpected and disagreeable experience for the imperious bone-melter to learn that the new incumbent was not at all disposed to follow in the steps of his predecessor, but, on the contrary, was apparently going to insist on having his own way with as much emphasis as Sir Morton Pippitt himself.

"I shall soon bring that fellow to his senses," declared Sir Morton, on the eventful morning which first saw the gage of battle thrown down; "I shall teach him that, parson or no parson, he will have to respect my authority! God bless my soul! Does he think I'm going to be dictated to at my time of life?"

He addressed these observations to his daughter, Miss Tabitha Pippitt, but whether she heard them or not was scarcely apparent. At any rate, she did not answer. Having finished her breakfast, she pulled out some knitting

from an embroidered bag hanging at her side and set her needles clicketing, while her father, redder in the face and more implacable of mood than ever, went out to see what he could do to save his galvanised iron roof from the hand of the spoiler.

But, as he might have known, if his irascibility had allowed him to weigh the pros and cons of the situation, his "authority" was of no avail. An angry letter to the Bishop of the diocese only drew forth a curt reply from the Bishop's secretary to the effect that as the Reverend John Walden was now the possessor of the living of St. Rest and had furthermore obtained a "faculty" for the proper restoration of the church, which was to be carried out at the said John Walden's own risk and personal expenditure, the matter was not open to any outside discussion. Whereat, Sir Morton's fury became so excessive that he actually shut up Badsworth Hall and went away for a whole year, greatly to the relief of the nervous editor of the *Riversford Gazette,* who was thus able to dismiss him with a comfortable paragraph, thus:

"Sir Morton Pippitt has left Badsworth Hall for a tour round the world. Miss Pippitt accompanies her distinguished father."

Then there followed a spell of peace;—and the restoration of the church at St. Rest was quietly proceeded with. Lovingly, and with tenderest care for every stone, every broken fragment, John Walden pieced together the ruined shrine of ancient days, and managed at last to trace and recover the whole of the original plan. It had never been a large building, its proportions being about the same as those of Roslin Chapel, near Edinburgh. The task of restoration was costly, especially when carried out with such perfection and regard to detail,—but Walden

grudged nothing to make it complete, and superintended the whole thing himself, rejecting all the semi-educated suggestions of the modern architect, and faithfully following out the ideas of the particular period in which the church was originally designed by those to whom the building of a "God's House" was a work of solemn prayer and praise. The ancient stones were preserved, and wherever modern masonry was used, it was cunningly worked to look as time-worn as the Norman walls, while the lancet windows were filled with genuine old stained glass purchased by degrees from different parts of England, each fragment being properly authenticated. A groined roof, simple yet noble in outline, covered in the building; ornamented with delicately rounded mouldings alternated with hollows so planned as to give the most forcible effects of light and shade according to the style of English Early Pointed work, and the only thing that was left incomplete was the pierced circular window above the chancel, which Walden sought to fill with stained glass of such indubitable antiquity and beauty of design that he was only able to secure bit by bit at long intervals. While engaged in collecting this, he judged it best to fill the window with ordinary clear glass rather than put in inferior stuff. For the chancel appeared to demand special reverence, from the nature of a wonderful discovery made in it during the work of restoration,—a discovery which greatly helped to sustain and confirm the name of both church and village as "St. Rest," and to entirely disprove the frequently-offered suggestion that it could ever have been meant for "St. East." And this is how the discovery happened.

One never-to-be-forgotten morning when the workmen were hewing away at the floor of the chancel, one of their

pick-axes came suddenly in contact with a hard substance which gave back a metallic echo when the blow of the implement came down upon it. Working with caution, and gradually clearing away a large quantity of loose stones, broken pieces of mosaic and earth, a curious iron handle was discovered attached to a large screw which was apparently embedded deep in the ground. Walden was at once informed of this strange "find" and hastened to the spot to examine the mysterious object. He was not very long in determining its nature.

"This is some very ancient method of leverage," he said, turning round to the workmen with an excitement he could barely conceal; "there is something precious underneath in the ground,—something which can probably be raised by means of this handle and screw. Dig round it about a yard away from the centre,—loosen the earth gently—be very careful!"

They obeyed; and all that day Walden stood watching them at work, his mind divided between hope and fear, and his spirit moved by the passionate exultation of the antiquary whose studies and researches are about to be rewarded with unexpected treasure. Towards sunset the men came upon a large oblong piece of what appeared to be alabaster, closely inlaid with pattens of worn gold and bearing on its surface the sculptured emblems of a cross, a drawn sword and a crown of laurel leaves intertwisted with thorns, the whole most elaborately wrought, and very little injured. As this slowly came to light Walden summoned all hands to assist him in turning the great iron screw which now stood out upright, some three or four feet from the aperture they had been digging. Wondering at his "fancy" as they termed it, they however had full reliance on his proved knowledge

of what he was about, and under his guidance they all applied themselves to the quaint and cumbrous iron handle which had been the first thing discovered and with considerable difficulty began to turn it round and round. As they proceeded laboriously in this task, while the screw creaked and groaned under the process with a noise as of splitting timber, all at once the oblong slab of alabaster moved, and rose upward about an inch.

"To it, boys!" cried Walden, his eyes sparkling. "To it again and harder! We shall have it with us in an hour!"

And truly, in somewhat less than an hour the strange old-world lever had lifted what it must often have lifted in a similar way in bygone years,—a magnificent and perfectly preserved sarcophagus, measuring some six or seven feet long by three feet wide, covered with exquisite carving at the sides, representing roses among thorns, the flowers having evidently at one time been centred with gems and which even now bore traces of gold. Round the lid there was some dim lettering which was scarcely discernible,—the lid itself was firmly closed and strongly cemented.

Exclamations of wonder, admiration, and excitement broke from all who had been engaged in the work of excavation and presently the whole village ran out to see the wonderful relic of a forgotten past, all chattering, all speculating, all staring. Walden alone stood silent; his head bared,—his hands clasped. He knew that only some great saint or holy recluse could have ever been so royally enshrined in ancient days, and the elaborate system of leverage used seemed to prove that the body laid within that wrought alabaster and gold must have been considered to be of that peculiar nature termed "miraculous,"

and worthy to be lifted from its resting-place into the chancel on certain particular occasions for the homage and reverence of the people. The sun poured down upon the beautiful object lying there,—on the groups of workmen who, instinctively imitating Walden's example, had bared their heads,—on the wrinkled worn faces of old village men and women,—on the bright waving locks of young girls, and the clear enquiring eyes of children, all gazing at the strange treasure-trove their ruined church had given up to the light of a modern day. Presently the chief workman asked Walden in a hushed voice:

"Shall we break it open, sir?"

"No,—never!" replied Walden gently but firmly. "That would be sacrilege. We may not lightly disturb the dead. The ashes enshrined in this wonderful casket must be those of one who was dear to the old-time church. They shall rest in peace. And as this sarcophagus is evidently fixed by its leverage system exactly in the middle of the chancel fronting the altar, we will let it remain there and occupy its own original place. The chancel could not have a grander ornament."

And so, in the middle of the chancel, between the altar and the steps which separated that part of the church from the main body of the building, the mysterious undated relic lay under the warm light of the eastern window, and people who were interested in antiquities came from far and near to see it, though they could make no more of it than Walden himself had done. The cross and sword might possibly indicate martyrdom; the laurels and thorn fame. Certainly there were no signs that the dumb occupant of that sealed coffer was a monarch of merely earthly power and state. When the alabaster came to be thoroughly

cleansed and polished, part of the inscription could be deciphered in the following letters of worn gold:

Sancta . vixit . Sancta obit . .
In . cœlum . sanctorum . .
transmigravit . . .
In Resurrectione Sanctorum
resurget
M . . Beatæ . ma . . R .

But to what perished identity these significant words applied remained an impenetrable mystery. Every old record was carefully searched,—every scrap of ancient history wherein the neighbourhood of St. Rest had ever been concerned was turned over and over by the patient and indefatigable John Walden, who followed up many suggestive tracks eagerly and lost them again when apparently just on the point of finding some sure clue,—till at last he gave up the problem in despair and contented himself and his parishioners by accepting the evident fact that in the old church at one time or another some saint or holy Abbot had been buried,—hence the name of St. Rest or "The Saint's Rest," which had become attached to the village. But at what exact period such saint or abbot had lived and died, was undiscoverable. When the restoration of the sacred shrine was completed, and an expectant congregation filled it to overflowing to assist at the solemn service of its re-dedication to the worship of God, not one among them all but was deeply impressed by the appearance of the restored chancel, with its beautiful columns and delicate capitals, arching like a bower of protection over the altar, and over that wonderful white sarcophagus lying snow-like in the rays of the sun, which flashed clear on its *stray bits of gold* and broken incrustation of gems, sending *a straight beam* through the eastern window on the one

word "Resurget" like a torch of hope from beyond the grave. Bishop Brent, Walden's old college friend, came to perform the ceremony of consecration, and this was the first time the inhabitants of St. Rest had seen a real Bishop for many years. Much excitement did his presence create in that quiet woodland dell, the more especially as he proved to be a Bishop somewhat out of the common. Tall and attenuated in form, he had a face which might almost be called magnetic, so alive was its expression,—so intense and passionate was the light of the deep dark melancholy eyes that burned from under their shelving brows like lamps set in a high watch-tower of intellect. When he preached, his voice, with its deep mellow cadence thrilled very strangely to the heart,—and every gesture, every turn of his head, expressed the activity of the keen soul pent up within his apparently frail body. The sermon he gave on the occasion of the re-dedication of the Church of St. Rest was powerful and emotional, but scarcely orthodox —and therefore was not altogether pleasing to Sir Morton Pippitt. He chose as his text: "Behold I show you a mystery; we shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed;" and on this he expatiated, setting forth the joys of the spiritual life as opposed to the physical,—insisting on the positive certainty of individual existence after death, and weaving into his discourse some remarks on the encoffined saint whose sarcophagus had been unearthed from its long-hidden burial-place and set again where it had originally stood, in the middle of the chancel. He spoke in hushed and solemn tones of the possibility of the holy spirit of that unknown one being present among them that day, helping them in their work, joining in their prayers of consecration and perhaps bestowing upon them additional blessing. At which statement, given with poetic earnest-

ness and fervour, Sir Morton stared, breathed hard and murmured in his daughter's ear "A Roman! The man is a Roman!"

But notwithstanding Sir Morton Pippitt's distaste for the manner in which the Bishop dealt with his subject, and his numerous allusions to saints in heaven and their probable guardianship of their friends on earth, the sermon was a deeply impressive one and lingered long in the memories of those who had heard it, softening their hearts, inspiring their souls and awakening them to hopeful considerations of a happier end than the mere grave.

Ten years, however, had now passed since John Walden had bought the living, and of these ten years three had been occupied in the restoration of the church, so that seven had elapsed since it had been consecrated. And during those seven years not once had Bishop Brent been seen again in St. Rest. He remained in the thoughts of the people as an indefinable association with whom they would fain have had more to do. Sir Morton Pippitt had passed from the sixties into the seventies, very little altered; —still upright, still inflexible and obstinate of temperament, he ruled the neighbourhood, Riversford especially, as much as was possible to him now that much of the management of St. Rest had passed under the quieter, but no less firm authority of John Walden, whose will was nearly always found in intellectually balanced opposition to his. The two seldom met. Sir Morton was fond of "county" society; Walden loathed it. Moreover, Miss Tabitha, wearing steadily on towards fifty, had, as the saying is, secretly "set her cap" at the Reverend John; and the mere sight of the sedately-amorous spinster set his nerves on edge. Devoting himself strictly to his duties, to the care of the *church, to* the interests of his parishioners, young and old,

to the cultivation of his garden, and to the careful preservation of all the natural beauties of the landscape around him,—John lived very much the life of a "holy man" of mediæval days; while Sir Morton built and "patronised" a hospital at Riversford, gave several prizes for cabbages and shooting competitions, occasionally patted the heads of a few straggling school-children, fussed round among his scattered tenantry, and wrote paragraphs about his own "fine presence and open-hearted hospitality" for publication in the *Riversford Gazette* whenever he entertained a house party at Badsworth Hall, which he very frequently did. He kept well in touch with London folk, and to London folk he was fond of speaking of St. Rest as "my" little village. But when London folk came to enquire for themselves as to the nature of his possession, they invariably discovered that it was not Sir Morton's little village at all but the Reverend John's little village. Hence arose certain discrepancies, and cross-currents of feeling, leading to occasional mild friction and "local" excitement. Up to the present time, however, Walden had on the whole lived a tranquil life, such as best suited his tranquil and philosophic temperament, and his occasional "brushes" with Sir Morton only served to give piquancy and savour to the quiet round of his daily habits. Now, all unexpectedly, there was to be a break,—a new source of unavoidable annoyance in the intrusion of a feminine authority,—a modern Squire-ess, who no doubt would probably bring modern ways with her into the little old-world place,—who would hunt and shoot and smoke,—perhaps even swear at her grooms,—who could tell? She would not, she could not interfere with the church or its minister, were she ever so much Miss Vancourt of Abbot's Manor,—but she could if she liked "muddle about" with many other matters, and

there could be no doubt that as the visible and resident mistress of the most historic house in the neighbourhood, she would be what is called "a social influence."

"And not for good!" mused John Walden, during a meditative stroll in his garden on the even of the May-day on which he had heard the disturbing news; "certainly not for good!"

He raised his eyes to the sky where the curved bow of a new moon hung clear and bright as a polished sickle. All was intensely still. The day had been a very busy one for him;—the children's dinner and their May-games had kept his hands full, and not till sunset, when the chimes of the church began to ring for Evensong, had he been able to snatch a moment to himself for quiet contemplation. The dewy freshness of the garden, perfumed by the opening blossoms of the syringa, imparted its own sense of calm and grave repose to his mind,—and as he paced slowly up and down the gravel walk in front of his study window watching the placid beauty of the deepening night, a slight sigh escaped him.

"It cannot be for good;" he repeated regretfully. "A woman trained as she must have been trained since girlhood, with all her finer perceptions blunted by perpetual contact with the assertive and ostentatious evidences of an excess of wealth,—probably surrounded too by the pitiful vulgarisms of a half-bred American society, too ignorant to admit or recognise its own limitations,—she must have almost forgotten the stately traditions of the fine old family she springs from. One must not expect the motto of 'noblesse oblige' to weigh with modern young women—more's the pity! I'm afraid the mistress of Abbot's Manor will be a disturbing element in the village, breeding discontent and trouble where there has been till now com-

parative peace, and a fortunate simplicity of life. I'm sorry! This would have been a perfect First of May but for the news of her coming. It is the one cloud in an otherwise clear sky!"

The young moon swinging lazily downward to the west, looked upon him as though she smiled. A little bat scurried past in fear and hurled itself into the dewy masses of foliage bordering the edge of the lawn. And from the reeds and sedges fringing the river beyond, there came floating a long whispering murmur that swept past his ears and died softly into space, as of a voice that had something strange and new to say, which might not yet be said.

CHAPTER IV.

Two days later on, when Walden was at work in his own room seriously considering the points of his sermon for the coming Sunday, his "head man about the place," Bainton, made a sudden appearance on the lawn and abruptly halted there, looking intently up at the sky, as though taking observations of a comet at noon. This was a customary trick of his resorted to whenever he wished to intrude his presence during forbidden hours. John saw him plainly enough from where he sat busily writing, though for a few minutes he pretended not to see. But as Bainton remained immovable and apparently rooted to the ground, and as it was likely that there he would remain till positively told to go, his master made a virtue of necessity, and throwing down his pen, went to the window. Bainton thereupon advanced a little, but stopped again as though irresolute. Walden likewise paused a moment, then at last driven to bay by the old gardener's pertinacity, stepped out.

"Now what is it, Bainton?" he said, endeavouring to throw a shade of sternness into his voice; "You know very well I hate being disturbed while I'm writing."

Bainton touched his cap respectfully.

"Now don't go for to say as I'm disturbing on ye, Passon," he remonstrated, mildly; "I ain't said a mortal wurrd! I was onny jes' keepin' my eye on the clap gate yonder, in case the party in the churchyard might walk through, thinkin' it a right-o'-way. Them swagger folk ain't no sort of idee as to respectin' private grounds."

Walden's eyes flashed.

"A party in the churchyard?" he repeated. "Who are they?"

"Who should they be?" And Bainton's rugged features expressed a sedate mingling of the shrewd and the contemptuous that was quite amazing. "Worn't you expectin' distinguished visitors some day this week, sir?"

"I know!" exclaimed Walden quickly; "Sir Morton Pippitt and his guests have come to 'inspect' the church! Ha-ha-ha-ha!" And he broke into a laugh so joyous and mellow that Bainton found it quite irresistible and joined in it with a deep "Hor-hor-hor!" evoked from the hollow of his throat, and beginning loudly, but dying away into a hoarse intermittent chuckle.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed the Reverend John again, throwing back his head with a real enjoyment in his capability for laughter. "You did quite right to disturb me, Bainton, —quite right! Where are Sir Morton and his party? What are they doing?"

"They was jes' crossin' the churchyard when I spied 'em," answered Bainton; "an' Sir Morton was makin' some very speshul observations of his own on the 'herly Norman

period.' Hor-hor-hor! An' they've got ole Putty Leveson with 'em——"

"Bainton!" interrupted Walden severely. "How often must I tell you that you should not speak of the rector of Badsworth in that disrespectful manner?"

"Very sorry, sir!" said Bainton complacently. "But if one of the names of a man 'appens to be Putwood an' the man 'imself is as fat as a pig scored for roastin' 'ole, what more natrul than the pet name of 'Putty' for 'im? No 'arm meant, I'm sure, Passon!—Putty's as good as Pippitt any day."

Walden suppressed his laughter with an effort. He was very much of a boy at heart, despite his forty odd years, and the quaint obstinacies of his gardener amused him too much to call for any serious remonstrance. Turning back to his study he took his hat and cane from their own particular corner of the room and started for the little clap gate which Bainton had been, as he said, "keeping his eye on."

"No more work to-day," he said, with an air of whimsical resignation; "but I may possibly get one or two hints for my sermon!"

He strode off and Bainton watched him go. As the clap gate opened and swung to again, and his straight athletic figure disappeared, the old gardener still stood for a moment or two ruminating.

"What a blessin' he ain't married!" he said thoughtfully. "A blessin' to the village, an' a blessin' to 'imself! He'd a bin a fine man spoilt, if a woman 'ad ever got 'old on 'im,—a fine man spoilt, jes' like me!"

An appreciative grin at his own expense spread among the furrows of his face at this consideration;—then he trotted slowly off towards the vegetable garden where his

"under gardeners" as he called three or four sturdy village lads employed to dig and hoe, constantly required his supervision.

Meanwhile Walden, leaving his own grounds, entered the churchyard, walking with softly reverent step among the little green mounds of earth, under which kind eyes were closed, and warm hearts lay cold, till, reaching the porched entrance of the church itself, he paused, brought to a halt by the sound of voices which were pitched rather too loud for propriety, considering the sacredness of the surroundings.

"That eastern window is crude—very crude!" said a growlingly robust baritone; "I suppose the reverend gentleman could not secure sufficient subscriptions to meet the expense of suitable stained glass?"

"Unfortunately Mr. Walden is a very self-opinionated man," replied a smooth and oily tenor, whose particular tone of speech Walden recognised as that of the Reverend "Putty" Leveson, the minister of Badsworth, a small scattered village some five or six miles "on the wrong side of Badsworth Hall," as the locality was called, owing to its removed position from the county town of Riversford. "He would not accept outside advice. Of course these columns and capitals are all wrong,—they are quite incongruous with early Norman walls,—but when ignorance is allowed to have its own way, the effect is always disastrous."

"Always—always,—my dear sir—always!" And the voice of Sir Morton Pippitt, high pitched and resonant, trolled out on the peaceful air. "The fact is, the church could have been much better done, had I been consulted! The whole thing was carried out in the most brazen manner, under my very nose, sir, under my very nose!—without

so much as a 'by your leave!' Shocking, shocking! I complained to the Bishop, but it was no use, for it seems that he has a perfect infatuation for this man Walden—they were college friends or something of that kind. As for the sarcophagus here, of course it ought in the merest common decency to have been transferred to the Cathedral of the diocese. But you see the present incumbent bought the place;—the purchase of advowsons is a scandal, in my opinion—however this man got it all his own way, more's the pity!—he bought it through some friend or other—and so——"

"So he could do as he liked with it," said a mild, piping falsetto. "And so far, he has made it beau-ti-ful! —beau-ti-ful!"

There was a pause, during which Walden, baring his head as he passed in, entered the sacred edifice. He became aware of Sir Morton Pippitt standing in the attitude of a University Extension lecturer near the sarcophagus in the middle of the chancel, with the Reverend Mr. Leveson and a couple of other men near him, while two more strangers were studying the groined roof with critical curiosity. As he approached, Sir Morton made a rapid sign to his companions and stepped down from the chancel.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Walden," he said in a loud whisper, and with an elaborate affectation of great heartiness; "I have brought His Grace the Duke of Lumpton to see the church."

Walden allowed his calm blue eyes to rest quietly on His Grace the Duke of Lumpton without much interest. His Grace was an undersized fat man, with a bald head and a red face, and on Walden's being presented to him, merely nodded with a patronisingly casual air.

"*Lord Mawdenham*"—continued Sir Morton, swelling

visibly with just pride at his own good fortune in being able to introduce a Lord immediately after a Duke, and offering Walden, as it were, with an expressive wave of his hand, to a pale young gentleman, who seemed seriously troubled by an excess of pimples on his chin, and who plucked nervously at one of these undesirable facial addenda as his name was uttered. Walden acknowledged his presence with silent composure, as he did the wide smile and familiar nod of his brother minister, the Reverend "Putty," whose truly elephantine proportions were encased in a somewhat too closely fitting bicycle suit, and whose grand-pianoforte shaped legs and red perspiring face together, presented a most unclerical spectacle of the "Church at large."

The two gentlemen who had been studying the groined roof, now brought their glances to bear on Walden, and one of them, a youngish man with a crop of thick red hair and a curiously thin, hungry face, spoke without waiting for Sir Morton's cue.

"Mr. Walden? Ye-es!—I felt sure it must be Mr. Walden! Let me congratulate you, sir, on your exquisite devotional work here! The church is beau-ti-ful—beau-ti-ful! A sonnet in stone! A sculptured prayer! Ye-es! It is so! Permit me to press your hand!"

John smiled involuntarily. There was a quaint affectation about the speaker that was quite irresistibly entertaining.

"Mr. Julian Adderley is a poet," said Sir Morton, whispering this in a jocose stage aside. "Everything is 'beautiful' to him!"

Mr. Julian Adderley smiled faintly, and fixed a pair of rather fine grey eyes on Walden with a mute appeal, as one who should say with Hamlet "These tedious old

ools!" Meanwhile Sir Morton Pippitt had secured the ast member of his party affectionately by the arm, and ontinuing his stage whisper said:

"Permit me, Mr. Walden! This is one of our greatest London literary lights! He will particularly appreciate anything you may be good enough to tell him respecting your work of restoration here—Mr. Marius Longford, of the Savile and Savage clubs!"

Mr. Marius Longford, of the Savile and Savage clubs, bent his head with an air of dignified tolerance. He was an angular personage, with a narrow head and a face cleanly shaven, except at the sides where two small pussy-cat whiskers fringed his sharply defined jaws. He had a long thin mouth, and long thin slits for his eyes to peep through,—they would have been eyelids with other people, but with him they were merely slits. He was a particularly neat man in appearance—his clothes were well brushed, his linen spotless, his iron-grey hair sleek, and his whole appearance that of a man well satisfied with his own exterior personality. Walden glanced at this great London literary light as indifferently as he would have glanced at an incandescent lamp in the street, or other mechanical luminary. He had not as yet spoken a word. Sir Morton had done all the talking; but the power of silence always overcomes in the end, and John's absolute noncommittal of himself to any speech, had at last the effect he desired —namely that of making Sir Morton appear a mere garrulous old interloper, and his "distinguished" friends somewhat of the cheap tripper persuasion. The warm May sun poured through the little shrine of prayer, casting flickers of gold and silver on the "Saint at Rest" before the altar, and showering azure and rose patterns through the ancient stained glass which filled the side lancet

windows. The stillness became for the moment intense and almost oppressive,—Sir Morton Pippitt fidgeted uneasily, pulled at his high starched collar and became red in the face,—the Reverend "Putty" forgot himself so far as to pinch one of his own legs and hum a little tune, while the rest of the party waited for the individual whom their host had so frequently called "the damned parson" to speak. The tension was relieved by the sudden quiet entrance of a young woman carrying a roll of music. Seeing the group of persons in the chancel, she paused in evident uncertainty. Walden glanced at her, and his composed face all at once lighted up with that kindly smile which in such moments made him more than ordinarily handsome.

"Come along, Miss Eden," he said in a low clear tone. "You are quite at liberty to practise as usual. Sir Morton Pippitt and his friends will not disturb you."

Miss Eden smiled sedately and bent her head, passing by the visitors with an easy demeanour and assured step, and made her way to where the organ, small, but sweet and powerful, occupied a corner near the chancel. While she busied herself in opening the instrument and arranging her music, Walden took advantage of the diversion created by her entrance to address himself to the knight Pippitt.

"If I can be of service to your friends in explaining anything about the church they may wish to know, pray command me, Sir Morton," he said. "But I presume that you and Mr. Leveson"—here he glanced at the portly "Putty" with a slight smile—"have pointed out all that is necessary."

"On the contrary!" said Mr. Marius Longford "of the Savile and Savage," with a smoothly tolerant air. "We are

really quite in the dark. Do we understand, for example, that the restoration of this church is entirely due to your generosity, or to assistance from public funds and subscriptions?"

"The restoration is due, not to my 'generosity,'" replied Walden, "but merely to my sense of what is fitting for Divine service. I have had no assistance from any fund or from any individual, because I have not sought it."

There was a pause, during which Mr. Longford fixed a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on his nose and gazed quizzically through them at Sir Morton Pippitt, whose countenance had grown uncomfortably purple in hue either with exterior heat or inward vexation.

"I thought, Sir Morton," he began slowly, when Mr. Leveson adroitly interrupted him by the query:

"Now what period would you fix, Mr. Longford, for this sarcophagus? I am inclined myself to think it of the fourteenth century."

A soft low strain of music here crept through the church,—the village schoolmistress was beginning her practice. She had a delicate touch, and the sounds her fingers pressed from the organ-keys were full, and solemn and sweet. His Grace the Duke of Lumpton coughed loudly; he hated music, and always made some animal noise of his own to drown it.

"What matters the period!" murmured Julian Adderley, running his thin hand through his thick hair. "Is it not sufficient to see it here among us, with us, *of* us?"

"God bless my soul! I hope it is not *of* us!" spluttered Sir Morton with a kind of fat chuckle which seemed to emanate from his stiff collar rather than from his throat. "'Ashes to ashes' of course; we are all aware of that—but not just yet!—not just yet!"

"I am unable to fix the period satisfactorily to my own mind," said Walden, quietly ignoring both Sir Morton and his observations on the Beyond; "though I have gone through considerable research with respect to the matter. So I do not volunteer any opinion. There is, however, no doubt that at one time the body contained in that coffer must have been of the nature termed by the old Church 'miraculous.' That is to say, it must have been supposed to be efficacious in times of plague or famine, for there are several portions of the alabaster which have evidently been worn away by the frequent pressure or touch of hands on the surface. Probably in days when this neighbourhood was visited by infection, drought, floods or other troubles, the priests raised the coffin by the system of leverage which we discovered when excavating, (and which is still in working order) and allowed the people to pass by and lay their hands upon it with a special prayer to be relieved of their immediate sickness or sorrow. There were many such 'miraculous' shrines in the early part of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries."

"Exactly," said Mr. Longford; "I imagine you may be right, Mr. Walden; it is evidently a relic of the very earliest phases of the Christian myth."

As he spoke the last words Walden looked straightly at him,—a fine smile hovered on his lips.

"It is as you say," he rejoined calmly—"It is a visible token of the time when men believed in an Unseen Force more potent than themselves."

The Duke of Lumpton coughed noisily again, and his friend, Lord Mawdenham, who up to the present had occupied the time in staring vaguely about him and anxiously feeling his pimples, said hurriedly:

"Oh, look here, Sir Morton—er—I say,—er—hadn't

we better be going? There's Lady Elizabeth Messing coming to lunch and you know she can't bear to be kept waiting—never do, you know, not to be there to see her when she arrives—he-he-he! We should never get over it in London or out of London—'pon my life!—I do assure you!"

Sir Morton's chest swelled;—his starched collar crackled round his expanding throat, and his voice became richly resonant as under the influential suggestion of another "titled" personage he replied:

"Indeed, you are right, my dear Lord Mawdenham! To keep Lady Elizabeth waiting would be an unpardonable offence against all the proprieties! Hum—ha—er—yes!—against all the proprieties! Mr. Walden, we must go! Lady Elizabeth Messing is coming to lunch with us at Badsworth. You have no doubt heard of her—eldest daughter of the Earl of Charrington!—yes, we must really be going! I think I may say, may I not, your Grace?"—here he bent towards the ducal Lumpton—"that we are all highly pleased with the way in which Mr. Walden has effected the restoration of the church?"

"Oh, I don't know anything at all about it!" replied His Grace, with the air of a sporting groom; "I've no taste at all in churches, and I'm not taking any on old coffins. It's a nice little chapel—just enough for a small village I should say. After all, don't-cher-know, you only want very little accommodation for a couple of hundred yokels; and whether it's old or new architecture doesn't matter to 'em a brass farthing!"

These observations were made with a rambling air of vague self-assertiveness which the speaker evidently fancied would pass for wit and wisdom. Walden said nothing. His brow was placid, and his countenance altogether peace-

ful. He was listening to the solemnly sweet flow of a Bach prelude which Miss Eden was skilfully unravelling on the organ, the notes rising and falling, and anon soaring up again like prayerful words striving to carry themselves to heaven.

"I think," said Mr. Marius Longford weightily, "that whatever fault the building may have from a strictly accurate point of view,—which is a matter I am not prepared to go into without considerable time given for due study and consideration,—it is certainly the most attractive edifice of its kind that I have seen for some time. It reflects great credit on you, Mr. Walden;—no doubt the work gave you much personal pleasure?"

"It certainly did so," replied John,—"and I'm afraid I am arrogant enough to be satisfied with the general result so far as it goes,—with the exception of the eastern window, of course!"

"Ah, that eastern window!" sighed the Reverend "Putty" with an air of æsthetic languor which was in comical contrast with his coarse and commonplace appearance. "That is a sad, sad flaw! A terrible incongruity!"

"I made up my mind from the first," pursued Walden, his equable voice seeming to float pleasantly on the tide of music with which the little sanctuary was just then filled; "that nothing but the most genuine and authentic old stained glass should fill that fine circular rose carving, and those lance apertures; so I am collecting it slowly, bit by bit, for this purpose. It will take time and patience, no doubt,—but I think and hope that success will be the end of the task I have set myself. In the meantime, of course, the effect of plain glass where there should be only the richest colouring is decidedly 'crude!'"

He smiled slightly, and there was an uncomfortable pause. Sir Morton Pippitt took out a voluminous red handkerchief covered with yellow spots and blew his nose violently therein while the Reverend Mr. Leveson nodded his large head blandly, as one who receives doubtful information with kindly tolerance. Mr. Marius Longford looked faintly amused.

"I understand!" said the light of the "Savile and Savage," slowly; "you seek perfection!"

He smiled a pallid smile; but on the whole surveyed Walden with more interest than he had hitherto done. Julian Adderley, who had during the last couple of minutes stepped up to the chancel, now stood gazing at the sarcophagus of the supposed Saint with a kind of melancholy interest. Reading the only legible words of the inscription in *sotto voce,* he sighed drearily.

"'In—Resurrectione—Sanctorum—Resurget!' How simple!—how new!—how fresh! To think that anyone ever held such a child's faith!"

"The Church is still supposed to hold it," said Walden steadily. "And her ministers also. Otherwise, religion is a farce, and its professors much less honest than the trusted servant who steals his master's money!"

Marius Longford smiled, and stroked one feline whisker thoughtfully.

"So you actually believe what you preach!" he murmured—"Strange! You are more of an antiquity than the consecrated dust enclosed in that alabaster! Believe me!"

"Much more,—much more!" exclaimed the fantastic Adderley. "To believe in anything at all is so remote!—so very remote!—and yet so new—so fresh!"

Walden made no reply. He never argued on religious

matters; moreover, with persons minded in the manner of those before him, it seemed useless to even offer an opinion. They exchanged meaning glances with each other, and followed Sir Morton, who was now moving down the central aisle of the church towards the door of exit, holding the Duke of Lumpton familiarly by the arm, and accompanied by Lord Mawdenham. Walden walked silently with them, till, passing out of the church, they all stood in a group on the broad gravelled pathway which led to the open road, where the Pippitt equipage, a large waggonette and pair, stood waiting, together with a bicycle, the property of the Reverend Mr. Leveson.

"Thank you, Mr. Walden!" then said Sir Morton Pippitt with a grandiose air, as of one who graciously confers a benefit on the silence by breaking it. "Thank you for—er—for—er—the pleasure of your company this—er—this morning! My friend, the Duke,—and Lord Mawdenham—and—er—our rising poet, Mr. Adderley—and—er—Mr. Longford, have been delighted. Yes—er—delighted! Of course you know *my* opinion! Ha-ha-ha! You know *my* opinion! It is the same as it ever was—I never change! When *I* have once made up my mind, it is a fixture! I have said already and I say it again, that the church was quite good enough for such people as live here, in its original condition, and that you have really spent a great deal of cash on a very needless work! I mustn't be rude, no, no, no!—but you know the old adage: 'Fools and their money!' Ha-ha-ha! But we shan't quarrel. Oh, dear no! It has cost *me* nothing, I am glad to say! Ha-ha! Nor anybody else! Now, if Miss Vancourt of Abbot's Manor had been here when you began this restoration business of yours, *she* might have had something to say—*ha*-ha-ha! She always has something to say!"

"You think she would have objected?" queried Walden, coldly.

"Oh, I won't go so far as that——no!—eh, your Grace?—we won't go so far as that!"

The Duke of Lumpton, thus suddenly adjured, looked round, and smiled vacantly.

"Won't go so far as what?" he asked. "Didn't catch it."

"I was talking of Maryllia Vancourt," said Sir Morton with a kind of fatuous leer. "*You* know her, of course!—everyone knows her more or less. Charming girl!—charming! Maryllia Van!—ha-ha!"

And Sir Morton laughed and leered again till certain veins, moved by cerebral emotion, protruded largely on his forehead. His Grace laughed also, but shortly and indifferently.

"Oh, ya-as—ya-as! She's the one who's just had a rumpus with her rich American aunt. I believe they don't speak. After years of devotion, eh? So like women, ain't it!"

The Reverend "Putty" Leveson, who had been stooping over his bicycle to set something right that was invariably going wrong with that particular machine, and who was redder than ever in the face with his efforts, now looked up.

"Miss Vancourt is coming back to the Manor to reside there, so I hear," he said. "Very dull for a woman accustomed to London and Paris. I expect she'll stay about ten days."

"One never knows—one cannot tell!" sighed Julian Adderley. "Sometimes to the satiated female mind, overwrought with social dissipation, there comes a strange longing for peace!—for the scent of roses!—for the yellow shine of cowslips!—for the song of the mating birds!—for the breath of cows!"

Mr. Marius Longford smiled, and picked a tall buttercup nodding in the grass at his feet.

"Such aspirations in the fair sex are absolutely harmless," he said. "Let us hope the lady's wishes may find their limit in a soothing pastoral!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Sir Morton. "You are deep, my dear sir, you are very deep! God bless my soul! Deep as a well! No wonder people are afraid of you! Clever, clever! I'm afraid of you myself! Come along, come along! Can I assist your Grace?" Here he pushed aside with a smothered "Damn!" the footman, who stood holding open the door of the waggonette, and officiously gave the Duke of Lumpton a hand to help him into the carriage. "Now, Lord Mawdenham, please! You next, Mr. Longford! Come, come, Mr. Adderley! Think of Lady Elizabeth! She will be arriving at the Hall before we are there to receive her! Terrible, terrible! Come along! we're all ready!"

Julian Adderley had turned to Walden.

"Permit me to call and see you alone!" he said. "I cannot just now appreciate the poetry of your work in the church as I should do—as I ought to do—as I must do! The present company is discordant!—one requires the music of Nature,—the thoughts,—the dreams!—But no more at present! I should like to talk with you on many matters some wild sweet morning,—if you have no objection?"

Walden was amused. At the same time he was not very eager to respond to this overture of closer acquaintanceship with one who, by his dress, manner and method of speech, proclaimed himself a "decadent" of the modern school of ethics; but he was nothing if not courteous. So he replied briefly:

"I shall be pleased to see you, of course, Mr. Adderley, but I must warn you that I am a very busy man—I should not be able to give you much time——"

"No explanations—I understand!" And Adderley pressed his hand with enthusiasm. "The very fact that you are busy in a village like this adds to the peculiar charm of your personality! It is so strange!—so new—so fresh!"

He smiled, and again pressed hands.

"Good-bye! The mood will send me to you at the fitting moment!"

He clapped his hat more firmly on his redundant red locks and clambered into the waiting waggonette. Sir Morton followed him, and the footman shut to the door of the vehicle with a bang as unnecessary as his master's previous "Damn!"

"Good morning, Mr. Walden!" then shouted the knight of bone-melting prowess. "Much obliged to you, I'm sure!"

Walden raised his hat with brief ceremoniousness and then as the carriage rolled away addressed the Reverend Mr. Leveson, who was throwing himself with hippopotamus-like agility across his bicycle.

"You follow, I suppose?"

"Yes. I'm lunching at Badsworth Hall. The Duke wants to consult me about his family records. You know I'm a bit of an authority on such points!"

Walden smiled.

"I believe you are! But mind you calendar the ducal deeds carefully," he said. "A slip in the lineal descent of the Lumptons might affect the whole prestige of the British Empire!"

A light shone in his clear blue eyes,—a flashing spark

of battle. Leveson stayed his bicycle a moment, wobbling on it uneasily.

"Lumpton goes back a good way," he said airily; "I shall take him up when I have gone through the history of the Vancourts. I'm on that scent now. I shall make a good bit of business directly Miss Vancourt returns; she'll pay for anything that will help her to stiffen her back and put more side on!"

"Really!" ejaculated Walden, coldly; "I should have thought her forebears would have saved her from snobbery."

"Not a bit of it!" declared Leveson, beginning to start the muscles of his grand-pianoforte legs with energy. "Rapid as a firework, and vain as a peacock! Ta!"

And fixing a small cap firmly on the back of his very large head, he worked his wheel with treadmill regularity and was soon out of sight.

Walden stood alone in the churchyard, lost for a brief space in meditation. The solemn strains of the organ which the schoolmistress was still playing, floated softly out from the church to the perfumed air, and the grave melodious murmur made an undercurrent of harmony to the clear bright warbling of a skylark, which, beating its wings against the sunbeams, rose ever higher and higher above him.

"What petty souls we are!" he murmured. "Here am I feeling actually indignant because this fellow Leveson, who has less education and knowledge than my dog Nebbie, assumes to have some acquaintance with Miss Vancourt! What does it matter? What business is it of mine? If she cares to accept information from an ignoramus, what is it to do with me? Nothing! Yet,—what a blatant ass the fellow is! Upon my word, it does me

good to say it—a blatant ass! And Sir Morton Pippitt is another!"

He laughed, and lifting his hat from his forehead let the soft wind breathe refreshing coolness on his uncovered hair.

"There are decided limits to Christian love!" he said, the laughter still dancing in his eyes. "I defy—I positively defy anyone to love Leveson! 'The columns and capitals are all wrong' are they?" And he gave a glance back at the beautiful little church in its exquisite design and completed perfection. "'Out of keeping with early Norman walls!' Wise Leveson! He ignores all periods of transition as if they had never existed—as if they had no meaning for the thinker as well as the architect—as if the movement upward from the Norman to the Early Pointed style showed no indication of progress! And whereas a church should always be a veritable 'sermon in stone' expressive of the various generations that have wrought their best on it, he limits himself to the beginning of things! I wonder what Leveson was in the beginning of things? Possibly an embryo Megatherium!"

Broadly smiling, he walked to the gate communicating with his own garden, opened it, and passed through. Nebbie was waiting for him on the lawn, and greeted him with the usual effusiveness. He returned to his desk, and to the composition of his sermon, but his thoughts were inclined to wander. Sir Morton Pippitt, the Duke of Lumpton and Lord Mawdenham, hovered before him like three dull puppets in a cheap show; and he was inclined to look up the name of Marius Longford in one of the handy guides to contemporary biography, in order to see if that flaccid and fish-like personage had really done anything in the world to merit his position as a shining luminary of the "Savage and Savile." Accustomed as he

was to watch the ebb and flow of modern literature, he had not yet sighted either the Longford straw or the Adderley cork, among the flotsam and jetsam of that murky tide. And ever and again Sir Morton Pippitt's coarse chuckle, combined with the covert smiles of Sir Morton's "distinguished" friends, echoed through his mind in connection with the approaching dreaded invasion of Miss Vancourt into the happy quietude of the village of St. Rest, till he experienced a sense of pain and aversion almost amounting to anger. Why, he asked himself, seeing she had stayed so long away from her childhood's home, could she not have stayed away altogether? The swift and brilliant life of London was surely far more suited to one who, according to "Putty" Leveson, was "rapid as a firework, and vain as a peacock." But was "Putty" Leveson always celebrated for accuracy in his statements? No! Certainly not—yet——

Then something seemed to fire him with a sudden resolution, for he erased the first lines of the sermon he had begun, and altered his text, which had been: "Glory, honour and peace to every man that worketh good." And in its place he chose, as a more enticing subject of discourse:

"The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God, of great price."

CHAPTER V.

THE warm bright weather continued. Morning after morning dawned in unclouded sunshine, and when Saturday concluded the first five days of the "May-month" the inhabitants of St. Rest were disposed to concede that it was just possible they might have what they called "a

spell of fair weather." Saturday was the general "cleaning-up day" in the village—the day when pails of water were set out in unexpected places for the unwary to trip over; when the old flagstones poured with soapsuds that trickled over the toes of too-hasty passers-by; when cottage windows were violently squirted at with the aid of garden-syringes and hose,—and when Adam Frost, the sexton, was always to be found meditating, and even surreptitiously drinking beer, in a quiet corner of the churchyard, because he was afraid to go home, owing to the persistent housewifely energy of his better half, who "washed down" everything, "cleaned out" everything, and had, as she forcibly expressed it, "the Sunday meals on her mind." It was a day, too, when Bainton, released from his gardening duties at the rectory at noon, took a thoughtful stroll by himself, aware that his "Missis" was scrubbing the kitchen, and 'wouldn't have him muckin' about,"—and when John Walden, having finished his notes for the Sunday's sermon, felt a sense of ease and relief, and considered himself at liberty to study purely Pagan literature, such as *The Cratylus* of Plato. But on this special Saturday he was not destined to enjoy complete relaxation. Mrs. Spruce had sent an urgent appeal to him to "kindly step up to the Manor in the afternoon." And Mrs. Spruce's husband, a large, lumbering, simple-faced old fellow, in a brown jacket and corduroys, had himself come with the message, and having delivered it, stood on Walden's threshold, cap in hand, waiting for a reply. John surveyed his awkward, peasant-like figure with a sense of helplessness,—excuses and explanations he knew would be utterly lost on an almost deaf man. Submitting to fate, he nodded his head vigorously, and spoke as loudly as he judged needful.

"All right, Spruce! Say I'll come!"

"Jes' what I told her, sir," answered Spruce in a remarkably gentle tone. "It's a bit okkard, but if she doos her dooty, no 'arm can 'appen, no matter if it's all the riches of the yearth."

John felt more helpless than ever. What was the man talking about? He drew closer and spoke in a more emphatic key.

"Look here, Spruce! Tell your wife I'll come after luncheon. Do you hear? Af—ter lun—cheon."

Spruce put one hand to his ear and smiled blandly.

"Ezackly, sir! I quite agrees with ye; but women are allus a bit worrity-like, and of course there's a deal to do, and she got frightened with the keys, and when she saw them fine clothes and what not,—so I drawed her a glass of cherry-cordial, an' sez I 'Now, old 'ooman,' sez I, 'don't skeer yerself into fits. I'll fetch the passon to ye.' And with that, she seemed easier in her mind. Lord love ye! it's a great thing to fetch the passon at once when there's anything a bit wrong. So, if you'd step up, sir?——"

Driven almost to despair, Walden put his lips close to the old man's obstinate ear.

"Yes," he bellowed—"af—ter lun—cheon! Yes! Ye—es!"

His reply at last penetrated the closed auricular doors of Spruce's brain.

"Thank you, kindly, sir, I'm sure," he said, still in the same meek and quiet tone. "And if I might make so bold, sir, seein' there's likely to be changes up at the Manor, if it should be needful to speak for me and my old 'ooman, p'raps you'd be so good, sir? We wouldn't *like to leave* the old place now, sir——"

His soft, hesitating voice faltered, and he suddenly

brushed his hand across his poor dim eyes. The pathos of this hint was not lost on Walden, who, forgetting all his own momentary irritation, rose manfully to the occasion and roared down the old man's ears like one of the far-famed "Bulls of Bashan."

"Don't worry!" he yelled, his face becoming rapidly crimson with his efforts; "I'll see you all right! You shan't leave the Manor if I can prevent it! I'll speak for you! Cheer up! Do you hear! Che—er up!"

Spruce heard very clearly this time, and smiled.

"Thank you, Passon! God bless you! I'm sure you'll help us, if so be the lady is a hard one——"

He trusted himself to say no more, but with a brief respectful salutation, put on his cap and turned away.

Left alone, Walden drew a long breath and wiped his brow. To make poor old Spruce hear was a powerful muscular exertion. Nebbie had been so much astonished at the loud pitch of his master's voice, that he had retired under a sofa in alarm, and only crawled out now as Spruce departed, with small anxious waggings of his tail. Walden patted the animal's head and laughed.

"Mind you don't get deaf in your old age, Nebbie!" he said. "Phew! A little more shouting like that and I should be unable to preach to-morrow!"

Still patting the dog's head, his eyes gradually darkened and his brow became clouded.

"Poor Spruce!" he murmured. "'Help him, if so be the lady is a hard one!' Already in fear of her! I expect they have heard something—some ill-report—probably only too correctly founded. Yet, how it goes against the grain of manhood to realise that any 'lady' may be 'a hard one!' But, alas!—what a multitude of 'hard ones'

there are! Harder than men, perhaps, if all the truth were known!"

And there was a certain sternness and rooted aversion in him to that dim approaching presence of the unknown heiress of Abbot's Manor. He experienced an instinctive dislike of her, and was positively certain that the vague repugnance would deepen into actual antipathy.

"One cannot possibly like everybody," he argued within himself, in extenuation of what he felt was an unreasonable mental attitude. "And modern fashionable women are among the most unlikeable of all human creatures. Any one of them in such a village as this would be absurdly out of place."

Thus self-persuaded, his mood was a singular mixture of pity and resentment when, in fulfilment of his promise, he walked that afternoon up the winding road which led to the Manor, and avoiding the lodge gates, passed through a rustic turnstile he knew well and so along a path across meadows and through shrubberies to the house. The path was guarded by a sentinel board marked "Private. Trespassers will be prosecuted." But in all the years he had lived at St. Rest, he cared nothing for that. As rector of the parish he had his little privileges. Nebbie trotted at his heels with the air of a dog accustomed to very familiar surroundings. The grass on either side was springing up long and green,—delicate little field flowers were peeping through it here and there, and every now and then there floated upwards the strong sweet incense of the young wild thyme. The way he had chosen to walk was known as a "short cut" to Abbot's Manor, and ten minutes of easy striding brought him into the dewy coolness of a thicket of dark firs, at the end of which, round a sharp turn, the fine old red brick and timbered gables of the house came

into full view. He paused a moment, looking somewhat regretfully at the picture, warmly lit up by the glow of the bright sun,—a picture which through long habitude of observation had grown very sweet to him. It was not every day that such a house as Abbot's Manor came within reach of the archæologist and antiquarian. The beautiful tiled roof—the picturesque roughness and crookedness of the architectural lines of the whole building, so different to the smooth, hard, angular imitations of half-timbered work common in these degenerate days, were a delight to the eyes to rest upon,—a wealth of ivy clung thickly to the walls and clambered round the quaint old chimneys;—some white doves clustered in a group on the summit of one broad oak gable, were spreading their snowy wings to the warm sun and discussing their domestic concerns in melodious cooings;—the latticed windows, some of which in their unspoilt antiquity of "horn" panes were a particular feature of the house, were all thrown open,—but to Walden's sensitive observation there seemed a different atmosphere about the place,—a suggestion of change and occupation which was almost startling. He paced slowly on, and arrived at the outside gate, which led into a square old-fashioned court, such as was common to Tudor times, paved on three sides and planted with formal beds of flowers, the whole surrounded by an ancient wall. The gate was ajar, and pushing it open he passed in, glancing for a moment at the grey weather-beaten sun-dial in the middle of the court which told him it was three-o'clock. For four centuries, at least, that self-same dial had marked the hour in that self-same spot, a silent commentary on the briefness of human existence, as compared with its own strange non-sentient lastingness. The sound of Walden's footsteps on the old paving-stones awoke faint echoes, and

startled away a robin from a spray of blossoming briar-rose, and as he walked up to the great oaken porch of entrance,—a porch heavily carved with the Vaignecourt or Vancourt emblems, and as deep and wide in its interior as a small room, an odd sense came over him that he was no longer an accustomed visitor to a beautiful "show house" so much as a kind of trespasser on forbidden ground. The thick nail-studded doors, champed with huge bolts and bars, stood wide open; no servant was on the threshold to bid him enter, and for a moment he hesitated, uncertain whether to ring the bell, or to turn back and go away, when suddenly Mrs. Spruce emerged from a shadowy corner leading to the basement, and hailed his appearance with an exclamation of evident relief.

"Thank the Lord and His goodness, Passon Walden, here you are at last! I'd made up my mind the silly fool of a Spruce had brought me the wrong message;—a good meanin' man, but weak in the upper storey, 'cept where trees is concerned and clearing away brushwood, when I'd be bold to say he's as handy as they make 'em—but do, for mercy's sake, Passon, step inside and see how we've got on, for it's not so bad as it might have been, an' I've seen worse done at a few days' notice than even myself with hired hands on a suddint could ever do. Step in, sir, step in—we're leavin' the door open to let the sun in a bit to warm the hall, for the old stained glass do but filter it through at its best; not but that we ain't had a fire in it night and mornin' ever since we had Miss Vancourt's letter."

Walden made no attempt to stem the flow of the worthy woman's discourse. From old experience, he knew that to be an impossible task. So he stepped in as he was bidden, and looked round the grand old hall, de-

corated with ancient armour, frayed banners and worn scutcheons, feeling regretfully that perhaps he was looking at it so for the last time. No one more than he had appreciated the simple dignity of its old-world style, or had more correctly estimated the priceless value of the antique oak panelling that covered its walls. He loved the great inkle-nook, set deep back as it were, in the very bosom of the house, with its high and elaborately carved benches on each side, and its massive armorial emblems wrought in black oak, picked out with tarnished gold, crimson and azure,—he appreciated every small gleam and narrow shaft of colour reflected by the strong sun through the deeply-tinted lozenge panes of glass that filled the lofty oriel windows on either side,—and the stuffed Knight-in-armour, a model figure "clad in complete steel," of the fourteenth century, which stood, holding a spear in its gauntleted hand near the doorway leading to the various reception rooms, was almost a personal friend. Mrs. Spruce, happily unconscious of the deepening melancholy which had begun to tinge his thoughts, led the way through the hall, still garrulously chirping.

"We've cleaned up wonderfully, considerin'—and it was just the Lord's providence that at Riversford I found a decent butler and footman what had jes' got the sack from Sir Morton Pippitt's and were lookin' for a place temp'ry, preferring London later, so I persuaded both of 'em to come and try service with a lady for once, instead of with a fussy old ancient, who turns red and blue in the face if he's kept waitin' 'arf a second—and I picked up with a gel what the footman was engaged to, and that'll keep *him* a fixture,—and I found the butler had a hi on a young woman at the public-house 'ere,—so that's what you may call an 'hattraction,' and then I got two

more 'andy gels which was jes' goin' off to see about Mrs. Leveson's place, and when I told 'em that there the sugar was weighed out, and the tea dispensed by the ounce, as if it was chemicals, and that please the Lord and anybody else that likes, they'd have better feedin' if they came along with me, they struck a bargain there and then. And then as if there was a special powerful blessin' on it all, who should come down Riversford High Street but one of the best cooks as ever took a job, a Scotch body worth her weight in gold, and she'd be a pretty big parcel to weigh too, but she can send up a dinner for one as easy as for thirty, which is as good a test as boilin' a tater—and 'as got all her wits about her. She was just goin' to advertise for a house party or shootin' job, so we went into the Crown Inn at Riversford and had tea together and settled it. And they all come up in a wagginette together as merry as larks;—so the place is quite lively, Passon, I do assure you, 'specially for a woman like me which have had it all to myself and lonesome like for many years. I've made Kitty useful, too, dustin' and polishin'—gels can't begin their trainin' too early, and all has been goin' on fine;—not but what there's a mighty sight of eatin' and drinkin' now, but it's the Lord's will that human bein's should feed even as the pigs do, 'specially domestic servants, and there's no helpin' of it nor hinderin'—but this mornin's business did put me out a bit, and I do assure you I haven't got over it yet, but howsomever Spruce says 'Do yer dooty!'—and I'm a-doin' it to the best of my belief and 'ope—still it do make my mind a bit ricketty——"

Silently Walden followed her through the rooms, saying *little in response* to her remarks, "ricketty" or otherwise, *and noting all* the various changes as he went. In the

dining-room there was a great transformation. The fine old Cordova leather chairs were all released from their brown holland coverings,—the long-concealed Flemish tapestries were again unrolled and disclosed to the light of day—valuable canvases that had been turned to the wall to spare their colour from the too absorbing sunshine, were now restored to their proper positions, and portraits by Vandyke, and landscapes by Corot gave quite a stately air of occupation to a room, which being large and lofty, had always seemed to Walden the loneliest in the house for lack of a living presence. He trod in the restless wake of Mrs. Spruce, however, without comment other than a word of praise such as she expected, for the general result of her labours in getting the long-disused residence into habitable condition, and was only moved to something like enthusiasm when he reached what was called "the morning room," an apartment originally intended to serve as a boudoir for that beautiful Mrs. Vancourt, the bride who never came home. Here all the furniture was of the daintiest design,—here rich cushions of silk and satin were lavishly piled on the luxurious sofas and in the deep easy-chairs,—curtains of cream brocade embroidered by hand with garlands of roses, draped the sides of the deep embrasured window-nook whence two wide latticed doors opened outwards to a smooth terrace bordered with flowers, where two gardeners were busy rolling the rich velvety turf,—and beyond it stretched a great lawn shaded with ancient oaks and elms that must have seen the days of Henry VII. The prospect was fair and soothing to the eyes, and Walden gazing at it, gave a little involuntary sigh of pleasure.

"This is beautiful!" he said, speaking more to himself than to anyone—"Perfectly beautiful!"

"It is so, sir," agreed Mrs. Spruce, with an air of comfortably placid conviction; "there's no doubt about it —it's as beautiful a room as could be made for a queen, though I say it—but whether our new lady will like it, is quite another question. You see, sir, this room was always kept locked in the Squire's time, and so was all the other rooms as was got ready for the wife as never lived to use them. The Squire wouldn't let a soul inside the doors, not even his daughter. And now, sir, will you please read the letter I got this morning, which as you will notice, is quite nice-like and kindly, more than the other—onny when the boxes came I was a bit upset. You see the letter was registered and had the keys inside it all right."

Walden took the missive in reluctant silence. The same thick notepaper, odorous with crushed violets—the same bold, dashing handwriting he had seen before, but the matter expressed in it was worded somehow in a totally different tone to that of the previous letter from the same hand.

"DEAR MRS. SPRUCE," it ran: "I enclose the keys of my boxes which I am sending in advance, as I never travel with luggage. Kindly unpack all the contents and arrange them in the wardrobes and presses of my mother's rooms. If I remember rightly, these rooms have never been used, but I intend to take them for myself now, so please have everything prepared. I have received your letter in which you say there is some difficulty in getting good servants at so short a notice. I quite understand this, and am sure you will arrange for the best. Should *everything* not be quite satisfactory, we can make altera-

tions when I come. I expect to arrive home in time for afternoon tea. MARYLLIA VANCOURT."

Walden folded up the letter and gave it back to its owner.

"Well, so far, you have nothing to complain of, Mrs. Spruce," he said, with a little smile. "The lady is evidently prepared to excuse any deficiencies arising from the hurry of your preparations."

"Yes, sir, that may be," answered Mrs. Spruce; "but if so be you saw what I've seen you mightn't take it so easily. Now, sir, if you'll follow me, you'll be able to judge of the quandary we was in till we got our senses back."

Beginning to be vaguely amused and declining to speculate as to the "quandary" which according to the good woman had resulted in a species of lunacy, Walden followed as he was told, and slowly ascended the broad staircase, one of the finest specimens of Tudor work in all England, with its richly turned balustrades and grotesquely carved headpieces, but as he reached the upper landing, he halted abruptly, seeing through an open door mysterious glimmerings of satins and laces, to which he was entirely unaccustomed.

"What room is that?" he enquired.

"That's what we used to call 'the bride's room,' sir," replied Mrs. Spruce, smoothing down her black skirts with an air of fussy importance, and heaving a sigh: "Miss Maryllia's mother was to have had it. Don't be afraid to step inside, Passon; everythink's been turned out and aired, and there's not a speck of damp or dismals anywhere, and you'll see for yourself what a time we're 'avin' though we're gettin' jes' a bit straight now, and

I've 'ad Nancy Pyrle as is 'andy with her pencil to mark things down as they come to 'and. Step inside, Passon Walden,—do step inside!"

But Walden, held back by some instinctive fastidiousness, declined to move further than the threshold of this hitherto closed and sacredly guarded chamber. Leaning against the doorway he looked in wonderingly, with a vague feeling of bewilderment, while Mrs. Spruce, trotting busily ahead, gave instructions to a fresh-faced country lass, who, breathing very hard, as though she were running, was carefully shaking out what seemed to be a fairy's robe of filmy white lace, glistening with pearls.

"Ye see, Passon, this is what all my trouble's about" —she said—"Fancy 'avin' to unpack all these grand clothes, and sort 'em as they comes, not knowin' whether they mayn't fall to bits in our 'ands, some of 'em bein' fine as cobwebs, an' such body linen as was never made for any mortal woman in St. Rest, all lace an' silk an' little ribbins! When the trunks arrived an' we got 'em into the 'all, I felt *that* faint, I do assure ye! For me to 'ave to unpack an' open 'em, and take out all the things inside,—ah, Passon, it's an orful 'sponsibility, seein' there's jewels packed among the dresses quite reckless-like, rubies an' sapphires an' diamants, somethin' amazin', and we've taken a reg'lar invent'ry of them all lest somethin' might be missin', for the Lord He only knows whether there might not be fifty thousand pounds of proputty in one of them little kicketty boxes, all velvet and satin, made just as if they was sweetmeats, only when ye looks inside ye sees a sparklin' stone glisterin' at ye, and ye know it's wuth a fortune! I do assure ye, Passon, I've never seen such things in all my life! Miss Maryllia must be mortal extravagant, for there's enough in one of them boxes to

feed the whole village of St. Rest for several years. Ah! Passon, I do assure ye, I've thought of Scripter many a time this morning'; 'Whose adornin' let it be the adornin' of a meek and quiet spirit,' which is a hornament and no mistake!"

Walden made no remark. It never even occurred to him just then that Mrs. Spruce was unconsciously rendering in her own particular fashion the text he had chosen for the next day's sermon. Never in all his life before had he experienced such strongly mingled sensations of repulsion and interest as at that moment. With a kind of inward indignation, he asked himself what business he had to be there looking curiously into a woman's room, littered with all the fripperies and expensive absurdities of a woman's apparel? Above all, why should he be so utterly ridiculous and inconsequential in his own mind as to find himself deeply fascinated by such a spectacle? In all the years he had passed with his sister, so long as she had lived, he had never seen such a bewildering disorder of feminine clothes. He had never had the opportunity of noting the pathetic difference existing between the toilette surroundings of a woman who is strong and well, and of one who is deprived of all natural coquetry by the cruel ravages of long sickness and disease. His sister, beautiful even in her incurable physical affliction, had always borne that affliction more or less in mind, and had attired herself with a severely simple taste,—her bedroom, where she had had to pass so many weary hours of suffering, had been a model of almost Spartan-like simplicity, and her dressing-table was wont to be far more conspicuous for melancholy little medicine-phials than for flashing silver-stoppered cut-glass bottles, exhaling the rarest perfumes. Then, since

her death, Walden had lived so entirely alone, that the pretty vanities of bright and healthy women were quite unfamiliar to him. The present glittering display of openly expressed frivolity seemed curiously new, and vaguely alarming. He was angry with it, yet in a manner attracted. He found himself considering, with a curious uneasiness, two small nondescript pink objects that were lying on the floor at some distance from each other. At a first glance they appeared to be very choice examples of that charming orchid known as the "Cypripedium,"—but on closer examination it was evident they were merely fashionable evening shoes. Again and again he turned his eyes away from them,—and again and again his glance involuntarily wandered back and rested on their helpless looking little pointed toes and ridiculously high heels. Considered from a purely "sanitary" point of view, they were the most wicked, the most criminal, the most absolutely unheard-of shoes ever seen. Why, no human feet of the proper size could possibly get into them, unless they were squeezed,—"Yes, squeezed!"—repeated Walden inwardly, with a sense of unreasonable irritation. "All the toes cramped and the heels pinched—everything out of joint and distorted—false feet, in fact, like everything else false that has to do with the modern fashionable woman!" There they lay,—apparently innocent;—but surely detestable, nay even Satanic objects. He determined he would have them removed—picked up—cast out—thrust into the nearest drawer—anywhere, in fact, provided they were out of his stern, clerical sight. Mrs. Spruce was continuing conversation in brisk tones, but whether she was addressing him, or the buxom young woman who, under her directions was shaking out or folding up the various garments taken out of the various boxes, he did

not know, and as a matter of fact, he did not care. She sounded like Tennyson's "Brook," with a "Men may come and men may go, but I go on for ever" monotonousness that was as depressing as it was incessant.

He determined to interrupt the purling stream.

"Mrs. Spruce," he began,—then hesitated, as she turned briskly towards him, looking like a human clothes-prop, with both fat arms extended in order to keep well away from contact with the floor a gauzy robe sparkling all over with tiny crystalline drops, which, catching the sunbeams, flashed like little points of flame.

"Beggin' your pardon, Passon, did you speak?"

"Yes. I think that you should not let anything lie about, as for example,—those—" and he pointed to the objectionable shoes with an odd sense of discomfiture. "They appear to be of a delicate colour and might easily get soiled."

Mrs. Spruce peered round over the sparkling substance she held, looking like a very ancient and red-faced cherub peeping over the rim of a moonlit cloud.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed. "What a hi you have, Passon! What a hi! Now them shoes missed me altogether. They must have dropped out of some of the dresses we've been unfoldin', for the packin's quite recklesslike, and ain't never been done by no trained maid. All hustled-bustled like into the boxes anyhow, as if the person what had done it was in a mortal temper or hurry. Lord! Don't I know how people crams things in when they's in a rage! Ah! Wait till I get rid of all these diamants," and she waddled to the deep oak wardrobe, which stood open, and carefully hung the glittering garment up by its two sleeveholes on two pegs,—then turned round with a sigh. "It's orful what the world's coming

to, Passon Walden,—orful! Fancy diamants all sewed onto a gown! I wouldn't let my Kitty in here for any amount of money! She'd be that restless and worritin' and wantin' the like things for 'erself, and the mortal mischief it would be, there's no knowin'! Why, the first 'commercial' as come round 'ere with 'is pack and 'is lies, would get her runnin' off with 'im! Ah! that's jes' where leddies makes such work for Satan's hands to do; they never thinks of the envy and jealousy and spite as eats away the 'arts of poor gels what sees all these fine things and ain't got no chance for to have them for their-selves!" Here, sidling along the floor, she picked up the pink shoes to which Walden had called her attention, first one and then the other. "Well! Call them shoes! My Kitty couldn't get her 'and into 'em! And as for a foot fittin' in! What a foot! It can't be much bigger'n a baby's. Well, well, what a pair o' shoes!"

She stood looking at them, a fat smile on her face, and Walden moved uneasily from the threshold.

"I'll leave you now, Mrs. Spruce," he said. "You've got plenty to do, and I'm in the way here."

"Well, now, Passon, that do beat me!" said Mrs. Spruce plaintively; "I thought you was a-goin' to help us!"

"Help you? I?" and Walden laughed aloud. "My dear woman, do you think I can unpack and unfold ladies' dresses? Of all the many incongruous uses a clergyman was ever put to wouldn't that be the most impossible?"

"Lord love ye, Passon Walden, I ain't askin' ye no such thing," retorted Mrs. Spruce. "Don't ye think it! For there's nothin' like a man, passon or no passon, for makin' rumples of every bit of clothes he touches, even his own coats and weskits, and I wouldn't let ye lay hands on any o' these things to save my life. Why, they'd go

to pieces at the mere sight of yer fingers, they're so flimsy. What I thought ye might do, was to be a witness to us while we sorted them all. It's a great thing to have a man o' God as a witness to the likes o' this work."

Again Walden laughed, this time with very genuine heartiness, though he did wish Mrs. Spruce would put away the troublesome pink shoes which she still held and to which he found his eyes still wandering.

"Nonsense! You don't want any witness!" he said gaily. "What are you thinking about, Mrs. Spruce? When Miss Vancourt is here, all you have to do is to go over every item of her property with her and see that she finds it all right. If anything is missing, it's not your fault."

"If anythink's missing," echoed Mrs. Spruce in sepulchral tones, "then the Lord knows what we'll do, for it'll be all over, so far as we're consarned! Beggars in the street'll be kings to us. Passon, I reckon ye doesn't read the newspapers much, does ye?"

"Pretty fairly," responded Walden still smiling. "I keep myself as well acquainted as I can with what is going on in the world."

"Does ye now?" And Mrs. Spruce surveyed him admiringly. "Well, now, I shouldn't have thought it, for ye seems as inn'cent as a babby I do assure ye; ye seems jes' that. But mebbe ye doesn't get the same kind o' newspapers which we poor folks gets—reg'ler weekly penny lists o' murders, soocides, railway haccidents, burgul'ries, fires, droppin's down dead suddint, struck by lightnin' and collapsis, with remedies pervided for all in the advertisements invigoratin' to both old and young, bone and sinew, brain and body, whether it be pills, potions, tonics, lotions, ointment or min'ral waters. There's

the sort o' papers we gets, or rather the 'Mother Huff' Public takes 'em all in for us, an' the 'ole village drinks the 'orrors an' the medicines in with the ale. Ah! It's mighty edifyin', Passon, I do assure ye, and many of us goes to church on Sundays and reads the 'orrors an' medicines in the arternoon, and whether we remembers your sermon or the 'orrors an' medicines most, the Lord 'E only knows. But it's in them papers I sees how fine leddies goes on nowadays, and if they misses so much as a two-and-sixpenny 'airpin, some of 'em out of sheer spite, will 'aul a gel up 'fore the p'lice and 'ave 'er in condemned cells in no time, so that ye see, Passon, if so be Miss Maryllia counts over the sparkling diamants and one's lost, we'll all be brought 'fore Sir Morton Pippitt as county mag'strate afore we've 'ad time to look at our breakfasts. Wherefore, I sez, why not 'ave a man o' God as witness?"

"Why not, indeed!" returned Walden, playfully, "but your 'man of God' won't be me, Mrs. Spruce! I'm off! I congratulate you on your preparations, and I think you are doing everything splendidly. If Miss Vancourt does not look upon you as a positive treasure, I shall be very much mistaken! Good afternoon!"

"Passon, Passon!" urged Mrs. Spruce. "Ye baint goin' already?"

"I must! To-morrow's Sunday, remember!"

"Ah!—that it is!" she sighed. "And my mind sorely misgives me that I never asked the new servants whether they was 'Igh, Low or Roman. It fairly slipped my memory, and they seemed never to think of it themselves. Why didn't they remind me, Passon?—can you answer me that? Which it proves the despisableness of our naturs that we never thinks of the religious sides of ourselves, but only our wages and stummicks. Wages and stummicks

comes first, and the care of the Lord Almighty arterwards. But, there, there!—we're jest a perverse and stiffnecked generation!"

Walden turned away. Mrs. Spruce, at last deciding to resign her hold of the pink shoes, over whose pointed toes she had been moralising, gave them into the care of the rosy-cheeked Phyllis, who was assisting her in her labours, and followed her "man of God" out to the landing.

"Do ye reely think we're doin' quite right, and that we're quite safe, Passon?" she queried anxiously.

"You're doing quite right, and you're quite safe," replied Walden laughing. "Go on in your present path of virtue, Mrs. Spruce, and all will be well! I really cannot wait a moment longer. Don't trouble to come and show me out,—I know my way."

He sprang down the broad stairs as lightly as a boy, leaving Mrs. Spruce at the summit, looking wistfully after him.

"It's a pity he couldn't stay!" she murmured dolefully. "There's a lace petticut which must be worth a fortune!—I'd have liked 'im to see it!"

But Walden was beyond recall. On reaching the bottom of the staircase he had turned into the picture gallery, a long, lofty room panelled with Jacobean oak on both sides and hung with choice canvases, the work of the best masters, three or four fine Gainsboroughs, Peter Lelys and Romneys being among the most notable examples. At one end of the gallery a close curtain of dark green baize covered a picture which was understood to be the portrait of the Mrs. Vancourt who had never lived to see her intended home. The late Squire had himself put up that curtain, and no one had ever dared to lift it. Mrs. Spruce had often been asked to do so, but she invariably

refused, "not wishin' to be troubled with ghos
old Squire" as she frankly explained. Facing
opposite end, hung another picture, disclos
warm and brilliant colouring to the light c
picture of Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt,
time of Charles the Second had been a not
the "merry monarch's" reign, and whose cos
sentment Mrs. Spruce had styled "the lady
velvet." John Walden had suddenly taken a
at this portrait though for ten years he had k
He walked up to it now slowly, studying it
the light fell on its rich colouring. The paint
a wonderfully attractive face,—the face of a chi
smiling and provocative,—her eyes were witchi
a moonlight halo of grey between the black p
azure iris,—her mouth, a trifle large, but pc
centre and curved in the "Cupid's bow" lin
sweetness and passion, and her hair,—but su
was indescribable! The painter of Charles
time had apparently found it difficult to de
there was a warm brown wave there, a tiny r
behind the small ear, and a flash of golden c
white brow, suggestive of all the tints of spring
sunshine. Habited in a riding dress of velv
of a purple pansy, Mary Elia Adelgisa held he
gauntleted gloves, and riding whip daintily in
her hat, a three-cornered piece of coquetry, l
wear, on a garden-seat hard by,—a blush
fastened carelessly in her close-fitting bodice
turned back with embroidered gold revers, a
head, great forest trees, heavy with foliage, m
of green. John Walden stood for a quiet th
studying the picture intently and also the su

"Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt, Born May 1st, 1651: Wedded her cousin, Geoffrey de Vaignecourt, June 5th, 1671: Died May 30th, 1681."

"Not a very long life!" he mused. "All the Vaignecourts, or Vancourts, have died somewhat early."

He let his eyes rest again on the portrait lingeringly.

"Mary Elia! I wonder if her descendant 'Maryllia' is anything like her?"

Slowly turning, he went out of the picture gallery, across the hall and into the garden, where the faithful Nebbie was waiting for him, amid a company of pigeons who were busy picking up what they fancied from the gravelled path, and who were utterly unembarrassed by the constant waggings of the terrier's rough tail. And he walked somewhat abstractedly through the old paved court, past the unsympathetic sun-dial, and out through the great gates, which were guarded on either side by stone griffins, gripping in their paws worn shields decorated with defaced tracings of the old Vaignecourt emblems. Clematis clasped these fabulous beasts in a dainty embrace, winding little tendrils of delicate green over their curved claws, and festooning their savage-looking heads with large star-like flowers of white and pale mauve, and against one of the weather-beaten shields an early flowering red rose leaned its perfumed head in blushing crimson confidence. Halting a moment in his onward pace, Walden paused, and looked back at the scene regretfully.

"Dear old place!" he said half aloud. "Many and many a happy hour have I passed in it, loving it, reverencing it, honouring its every stone,—as all such relics of a chivalrous and gracious past deserve to be loved, reverenced and honoured. But I fear,—yes!—I fear I shall never again see it quite as I have seen it for the past ten years,

—or as I see it now! New days, new days! And I am not progressive. To me the old days and old ways are best!"

CHAPTER VI.

* * * "AND the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always!"

So prayed John Walden, truly and tenderly, stretching out his hands in benediction over the bent heads of his little congregation, which responded with a fervent "Amen."

Service was over, and the good folks of St. Rest wended their gradual way out of church to the full sweet sound of an organ voluntary, played by Miss Janet Eden, who, as all the village said of her, "was a rare 'and at doin' the music proper." Each man and woman wore their Sunday best,—each girl had some extra bit of finery on, and each lad sported either a smart necktie or wore a flower in his buttonhole, as a testimony to the general festal feeling inspired by a day when ordinary work is set aside for the mingled pleasures of prayer, meditation and promiscuous love-making. The iconoclasts who would do away with the appointed seventh day of respite from the hard labours of every-day life, deserve hanging without the mercy of trial. A due observance of Sunday, and especially the English country observance of Sunday, is one of the saving graces of our national constitution. In the large towns, a growing laxity concerning the "keeping of the seventh day holy," is plainly noticeable, the pernicious example of London "smart" society doing much to lessen the old feeling of respect for the day and its sacredness; but in small greenwood places, where it is

still judged decent and obedient to the laws of God, to attend Divine worship at least once a day,—when rough manual toil is set aside, and the weary and soiled labourer takes a pleasure in being clean, orderly and cheerfully respectful to his superiors, Sunday is a blessing and an educational force that can hardly be over-estimated. In such a peaceful corner as St. Rest it was a very day of days. Tourists seldom disturbed its tranquillity, the "Mother Huff" public-house affording but sorry entertainment to such parties; the motor-bicycle, with its detestable noise, insufferable odour and dirty, oil-stained rider in goggled spectacles, was scarcely ever seen,—and motor-cars always turned another way on leaving the county town of Riversford, in order to avoid the sharp ascent from the town, as well as the still sharper and highly dangerous descent into the valley again, where the little mediæval village lay nestled. Thus it was enabled to gather to itself a strangely beautiful halcyon calm on the Lord's Day,—and in fair Spring weather like the present, dozed complacently under the quiet smile of serene blue skies, soothed to sleep by the rippling flow of its ribbon-like river, and receiving from hour to hour a fluttering halo of doves' wings, as these traditional messengers of peace flew over the quaint old houses, or rested on the gabled roofs, spreading out their snowy tails like fans to the warmth of the sun. The churchyard was the recognised meeting-place for all the gossips of the village after the sermon was over and the blessing pronounced,—and the brighter and warmer the weather, the longer and more desultory the conversation. On this special Sunday, the worthy farmers and their wives, with their various cronies and confidants, gathered together in larger groups than usual, and lingered about more than was even

their ordinary habit. Their curiosity was excited,—so were their faculties of criticism. The new servants from the Manor had attended church, sitting all together in a smart orderly row, and suggesting in their neat spick-and-span attire an unwonted note of novelty, of fashion, of change, nay, even of secret and suppressed society wickedness. Their looks, their attitudes, their whisperings, their movements, furnished plenty of matter to talk about,—particularly as Mrs. Spruce had apparently "given herself airs" and marshalled them in and marshalled them out again, without stopping to talk to her village friends as usual,—which was indeed a veritable marvel,—or to vouchsafe any information respecting the expected return of her new mistress, an impending event which was now well known throughout the whole neighbourhood. Oliver Leach, the land agent, had arrived at the church-door in an open dogcart, and had sat through the service looking as black as thunder, or as Bainton elegantly expressed it: "as cheerful as a green apple with a worm in it." Afterwards, he had driven off at a rattling pace, exchanging no word with anyone. Such conduct, so the village worthies opined, was bound to be included among the various signs and tokens which were ominous of a coming revolution in the moral and domestic atmosphere of St. Rest. Then again, the "Passon's" sermon that morning had been something of a failure. Walden himself, all the time he was engaged in preaching it, had known that it was a lame, halting and perfunctory discourse, and he had felt fully conscious that a patient tolerance of him on the part of his parishioners had taken the place of the respectful interest and attention they usually displayed. He was indeed sadly at a loss concerning "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit." He had desired to recommend the

cultivation of such a grace in the most forcible manner, yet he found himself wondering why fashionable women wore pink shoes much smaller than the natural size of the human foot? To be "meek and quiet" was surely an excellent thing, but then it was impossible of any man with blood in his veins to feel otherwise than honestly indignant at the extravagance displayed by certain modern ladies in the selection of their gowns! Flashing sparks of pearl and crystal sewn on cloud-like tissues and chiffons, danced before his eyes, as he ponderously weighed out the spiritual advantages of being meek and quiet; and his metaphors became as hazy as the deductions he drew from his text were vague and difficult to follow. He was uncomfortably conscious of a slight flush rising to his face, as he met the bland enquiring stare of Sir Morton Pippitt's former butler—now on "temp'ry" service at the Manor,—he became aware that there was also a new and rather pretty housemaid beside the said butler, who whispered when she ought to have been silent,—and he saw blankness on the fat face of Mrs. Spruce, a face which was tied up like a round red damaged sort of fruit in a black basket-like bonnet, fastened with very broad violet strings. Now Mrs. Spruce always paid the most pious attention to his sermons, and jogged her husband at regular intervals to prevent that worthy man from dozing, though she knew he could not hear a word of anything that was said, and that, therefore, he might as well have been allowed to sleep,—but on this occasion John was sure that even she failed to be interested in his observations on that "ornament," which she called "hornament" of the meek and quiet spirit, pronounced to be of such "great price." He realised that if any "great price" was at all in question with her that morning, it was the pos-

sible monetary value of her new lady's wardrobe. So that on the whole he was very glad when he came to the end of his ramble among strained similes, and was able to retire altogether from the gaze of the different pairs of eyes, cow-like, sheep-like, bird-like, dog-like, and human, which in their faithful watching of his face as he preached, often moved him to a certain embarrassment, though seldom as much as on this occasion. With his disappearance from the pulpit, and his subsequent retreat round by the back of the churchyard into the privacy of his own garden, the tongues of the gossips, restrained as long as their minister was likely to be within earshot, broke loose and began to wag with glib rapidity.

"Look 'ee 'ere, Tummas," said one short, thick-set man addressing Bainton, "look 'ee 'ere — thy measter baint oop to mark this marnin'! Seemed as if he couldn't find the ways nor the meanin's o' the Lord nohow!"

Bainton slowly removed his cap from his head and looked thoughtfully into the lining, as though seeking for inspiration there, before replying. The short, thick-set man was an important personage,—no less than the proprietor of the "Mother Huff" public-house; and not only was he proprietor of the said public-house, but brewer of all the ale he sold there. Roger Buggins was a man to be reckoned with, and he expected to be treated with almost as much consideration as the "Passon" himself. Buggins wore a very ill-fitting black suit on Sundays, which made him look like a cross between a waiter and an undertaker; and he also supported on his cranium a very tall top-hat with an extra wide brim, suggesting in its antediluvian shape a former close acquaintance with cast-off clothing stores.

"He baint himself"—reiterated Buggins emphatically.

"He was fair mazed and dazed with his argifyin'. 'Meek and quiet sperrit!' Who wants the like o' that in this 'ere mortal wurrld, where we all commences to fight from the moment we lays in our cradles till the last kick we gives 'fore we goes to our graves? Meek and quiet goes to prison more often than rough and ready!"

"Mebbe Passon Walden was thinkin' of Oliver Leach," suggested Bainton with a slight twinkle in his eye; "and 'ow m'appen we'd best be all of us meek and quiet when he's by. It might be so, Mr. Buggins,—Passon's a rare one to guess as 'ow the wind blows nor'-nor'-east sometimes in the village, for all that it's a warm day and the peas comin' on beautiful. Eh, now, Mr. Buggins?" This with a conciliatory air, for Bainton had a little reckoning at the "Mother Huff" and desired to be all that was agreeable to its proprietor.

Buggins snorted a defiant snort.

"Oliver Leach indeed!" he ejaculated. "Meek an' quiet suits him down to the ground, it do! There's a man wot's likely to have a kindly note of warnin' from my best fist, if he comes larruppin' round my place too often. 'Ave ye 'eard as 'ow he's chalked the Five Sisters?"

"Now don't go for to say that!" expostulated Bainton gently. "'E runs as near the wind as he can, but 'e'd never be stark starin' mad enough to chalk the Five Sisters!"

"Chalk 'em 'e *has!*" returned Buggins, putting quite a strong aspirate where he generally left it out,—"And down they're comin' on Wednesday marnin'. Which I sez yeste'day to Adam Frost 'ere: if the Five Sisters is to lay low, what next?"

"Aye! aye!" chorussed several other villagers who had been listening eagerly to the conversation. "You-uts!"

true, Mr. Buggins—you say gospel true. If the Five Sisters lay low, what next!"

And dismal shakings of the head and rollings of the eyes from all parties followed this proposition.

"What next," echoed the sexton, Adam Frost, who on hearing his name brought into the argument, showed himself at once ready to respond to it. "Why next we'll not have a tree of any size anywhere near the village, for if timber's to be sold, sold it will be, and the only person we'll be able to rely on for a bit of green shade or shelter will be Passon Walden, who wouldn't have a tree cut down anywhere on his land, no, not if he was starving. Ah! If the old Squire were alive he'd sooner have had his own 'ead chopped off than the Five Sisters laid low!"

By this time a considerable number of the villagers had gathered round Roger Buggins as the centre of the discussion,—some out of curiosity, and others out of a vague and entirely erroneous idea that perhaps if they took the proper side of the argument "refreshers" in the way of draughts of home-brewed ale at the "Mother Huff" between church hours might be offered as an amicable end to the conversation.

"Someone should tell Miss Vancourt about it; she's coming home to the Manor on Tuesday," suggested the barmaid of the "Mother Huff," a smart-looking young woman, who was however looked upon with grave suspicion by her feminine neighbours, because she dressed "beyond her station." "P'raps she'd do something?"

"Not she!" said Frost, cynically. "She's a fine lady, —been livin' with 'Mericans what will eat banknotes for breakfast in order to write about it to the papers arterwards. Them sort of women takes no 'count o' trees, except to make money out of 'em."

Here there was a slight stir among the group, as they saw a familiar figure slowly approaching them,—that of a very old man, wearing a particularly clean smock-frock and a large straw hat, who came out from under the church porch like a quaint, moving, mediæval Dutch picture. Shuffling along, one halting step at a time, and supporting himself on a stout ash stick, this venerable personage made his way, with a singular doggedness and determination of movement, up to the group of gossips. Arriving among them he took off his straw hat, and producing a blue spotted handkerchief from its interior wiped the top of his bald head vigorously.

"Now, what are ye at?" he said slowly. "What are ye at? All clickettin' together like grasshoppers in a load of hay! What's the mischief? Whose character are ye bitin' bits out of, like mice in an old cheese? Eh? Lord, Lord! Eighty-nine years o' livin' wi' ye, summer in and summer out, don't improve ye,—talk to ye as I will and as I may, ye're all as mis'able sinners as ever ye was, and never a saint among ye 'cept the one in the Sarky Fagus."

Here, pausing for breath, the ancient speaker wiped his head again, carefully flattening down with the action a few stray wisps of thin white hair, while a smile of tranquil and superior wisdom spread itself among the countless wrinkles of his sun-browned face, like a ray of winter sunshine awakening rippling reflections on a half-frozen pool.

We ain't doin' nothin', Josey!" said Buggins, almost timidly.

"Nor we ain't sayin' nothin'," added Bainton.

"We be as harmless as doves," put in Adam Frost with a sly chuckle; "and we ain't no match for sarpints!"

"Ain't you looking well, Mr. Letherbarrow!" ejaculated the smartly dressed barmaid. "Just wonderful for your time of life!"

"My time o' life?" And Josey Letherbarrow surveyed the young woman with an inimitable expression of disdain. "Well, it's a time o' life *you'll* never reach, sane or sound, my gel, take my word for't! Fine feathers makes fine birds, but the life is more'n the meat and the body more'n raiment. And as for 'armless as doves and no match for sarpints, ye may be all that and more, which is no sort of argyment and when I sez 'what mischief are ye all up to' I sez it, and expecks a harnser, and a harnser I'll 'ave, or I'll reckon to know the reason why!"

The men and women glanced at each other. It was unnecessary, and it would certainly be inhuman, to irritate old Josey Letherbarrow, considering his great age and various infirmities.

"We was jest a-sayin' a word or two about the Five Sisters—" began Adam Frost.

"Aye! aye!" said Josey. "That ye may do and no 'arm come of it; I knows 'em well! Five of the finest beech-trees in all England—Aye! aye! the old Squire was main proud of 'em——"

"They be comin' down," said Buggins; "Oliver Leach's chalk mark's on 'em for Wednesday marnin'."

"Comin' down!" echoed Josey—"Comin' down? Gar'n with ye all for a parcel o' silly idgits wi' neither rhyme nor reason nor backbone! Comin' down! Why ye might as well tell me the Manor House was bein' turned into a cow-shed! Comin' down! Gar'n!"

"It's true, Josey," said Adam Frost, beginning to make his way towards the gate of the churchyard, for he had just spied one of his numerous "olive-branches," frantically

beckoning him home to dinner, and he knew by stern experience what it meant if Mrs. Frost and the family were kept waiting for the Sunday's meal. "It's true, and you'll find it so. And whether it'll be any good speakin' to the new lady who's comin' home on Tuesday, or whether the Five Sisters won't be all corpses afore she comes, there's no knowin'. The Lord He gave the trees, but whether the Lord He gave Oliver Leach to take 'em away again after a matter of three or four hundred year is mighty doubtful!"

Old Josey looked stupefied.

"The Five Sisters comin' down!" he repeated dully. "May you never live to do my buryin', Adam Frost, if it's true!—and that's the worst wish I can give ye!"

But Adam Frost here obeyed the call of his domestic belongings, and hurried away without response.

Josey leaned on his stick thoughtfully for a minute, and then resumed his slow shuffling way. Any one of the men or women near him would have willingly given him a hand to assist his steps, but they all knew that he would be highly incensed if they dared to show that they considered him in any way feeble or in need of support. So they contented themselves with accompanying him at his own snail's pace, and at such a distance as to be within hearing of any remarks he might let fall, without intruding too closely on the special area in which he chose to stump along homewards.

"The Five Sisters comin' down, and the old Squire's daughter comin' 'ome!" he muttered. "They two things is like ile and water,—nothin' 'ull make 'em mix. The Squire's daughter—aye—aye! It seems but only yeste'-day the Squire died! And she was a fine mare that threw

him, too,—Firefly was her name. Aye—aye! It seems but yeste'day—but yeste'day!"

"D'ye mind the Squire's daughter, Josey?" asked one of the village women sauntering a little nearer to him.

"Mind her?" And Josey Letherbarrow halted abruptly. "Do I mind my own childer? It seems but yeste'day, I tell ye, that the Squire died, but mebbe it's a matter of six-an'-twenty 'ear agone since 'e came to me where I was a-workin' in 'is fields, and he pinted out to me the nurse wot was walkin' up and down near the edge of the pasture carryin' his baby all in long clothes. 'See that, Josey!' he sez, an' 'is eyes were all wild-like an' 'is lips was a' tremblin'. 'That little white thing is all I've got left of the wife I was bringin' 'ome to be the sunshine of the old Manor. I felt like killin' that child, Josey, when it was born, because its comin' into this wurrld killed its mother. That was an unnat'ral thing, Josey,' sez he—'There was no God in it, only a devil!' and 'is lips trembled more'n ever—'no woman ought to die in givin' birth to a child—it's jes' wicked an' cruel! I would say that to God Himself, if I knew Him!' An' he clenched 'is fist 'ard, an' then 'e went on—'But though I wanted to kill the little creature, I couldn't do it, Josey, I couldn't! Its eyes were like those of my Dearest. So I let it live; an' I'll do my best by it, Josey,'—yes, them's the words 'e said—'I'll do my best by it!'"

Here Josey broke off in his narrative, and resumed his crawling pace.

"You ain't finished, 'ave ye, Josey?" said Roger Buggins propitiatingly, drawing closer to the old man. "It's powerful interestin', all this 'ere!"

Josey halted again.

"*Powerful* interestin'? O' course it is! There ain't

nobody's story wot ain't interestin', if ye onny knows it. An' it's all six-an'-twenty year agone now; but I can see th' old Squire still, an' the nurse walkin' slow up an' down by the border of the field, hushin' the baby to sleep. And 'twas a good sound baby, too, an' thrived fine; an' 'fore we knew where we was, instid of a baby there was a little gel runnin' wild all over the place, climbin' trees, swarmin' up hay-stacks, an' up to all sorts of mischief—Lord, Lord!" And Josey began to chuckle with a kind of inward merriment; "I'll never forget the day that child sat down on a wopses' nest an' got all 'er little legs stung;—she was about five 'ear old then, an' she never cried—not she!—the little proud spitfire that she was, she jes' stamped 'er mite of a foot an' she sez, sez she: 'Did God make the wopses?' An' 'er nurse sez to 'er: 'Yes, o' course, lovey, God made 'em.' 'Then I don't think much of Him!' sez she. Lord, Lord! We larfed nigh to split ourselves that arternoon;—we was all makin' 'ay an' the old Squire was workin' wi' us for fun-like. 'I don't think much o' God, father!'—sez Miss Maryllia, runnin' up to 'im, an' liftin' up all 'er petticuts an' shewin' the purtiest little legs ye ever seed; 'Nurse sez He made the wopses!' He-ee-ee-hor-hor-hor!"

A slow smile was reflected on the faces of the persons who heard this story,—a smile that implied lurking doubt as to whether it was quite the correct or respectful thing to find entertainment in an anecdote which included a description of "the purtiest little legs" of the lady of the Manor whose return to her native home was so soon expected,—but Josey Letherbarrow was a privileged personage, and he might say what others dared not. As philosopher, general moralist and purveyor of copy-book maxims, he was looked upon in the village as the Nestor

of the community, and in all discussions or disputations was referred to as final arbitrator and judge. Born in St. Rest, he had never been out of it, except on an occasional jaunt to Riversford in the carrier's cart. He had married a lass of the village, who had been his playmate in childhood, and who, after giving him four children, had died when she was forty,—the four children had grown up and in their turn had married and died; but he, like a hardy old tree, had still lived on, with firm roots well fixed in the soil that had bred him. Life had now become a series of dream pictures with him, representing every episode of his experience. His mind was clear, and his perception keen; he seldom failed to recollect every detail of a circumstance when once the clue was given, and the right little cell in his brain was stirred. To these qualities he added a stock of good sound commonsense, with a great equableness of temperament, though he could be cynical, and even severe, when occasion demanded. Just now, however, his venerable countenance was radiant,—his few remaining tufts of white hair glistened in the sun like spun silver,—his figure in its homely smock, leaning on the rough ash stick, expressed in its very attitude benevolence and good-humour, and 'the purtiest little legs' had evidently conjured up a vision of childish grace and innocence before his eyes, which he was loth to let go.

"She was took away arter the old Squire was killed, worn't she?" asked Bainton, who was drinking in all the information he could, in order to have something to talk about to his master, when the opportunity offered itself.

"Aye! aye! She was took away," replied Josey, his smile darkening into a shadow of weariness. "The Squire's neck was broke with Firefly—every man, woman and child

knows that about here—an' then 'is brother came along, 'im wot 'ad married a 'Merican wife wi' millions, an' 'adn't got no children of their own. An' they took the gel away with 'em—a purty little slip of about fifteen then, with great big eyes and a lot of bright 'air;—don't none of ye remember 'er?"

Mr. Buggins shook his head.

"'Twas afore my time," he said. "I ain't had the 'Mother Huff' more'n eight years."

"I seed 'er once," said Bainton—"but onny once—that was when I was workin' for the Squire as extra 'and. But I disremember 'er face."

"Then ye never looked at it," said Josey, with a chuckle; "or bein' made man ye wouldn't 'ave forgot it. Howsomever, it's 'ears ago an' she's a woman growed—she ain't been near the place all this time, which shows as 'ow she don't care about it, bein' took up with 'er 'Merican aunt and the millions. An' she'd got a nice little penny of 'er own, too, for the old Squire left 'er all he 'ad, an' she was to come into it all when she was of age. An' now she's past bein' of age, a woman of six-an'-twenty,—an' 'er rich uncle's dead, they say, so I suppose she an' the 'Merican aunt can't work it out together. Eh dear! Well well! Changes there must be, and changes there will be, and if the Five Sisters is a-comin' down, then there's ill-luck brewin' for the village, an' for every man, woman and child in it! Mark my wurrd!"

And he resumed his hobbling trudge, shaking his head dolefully.

"Don't say that, Josey!" murmured one of the women with a little shudder. "You didn't ought to talk about ill-luck. Don't ye know it's onlucky to talk about ill-luck?"

"No, I don't know nothin' o' the sort," replied Josey.

"Luck there is, and ill-luck,—an' ye can talk as ye like about one or t'other, it don't make no difference. An' there's some things as comes straight from the Lord, and there's others what comes straight from the devil, an' ye've got to take them *as* they comes. 'Tain't no use floppin' on yer knees an' cryin' on either the Lord or the devil,—they's outside of ye an' jest amusin' theirselves as they likes. Mussy on me! D'ye think I don't know when the Lord 'ides 'Is face behind the clouds playin' peep-bo for a bit, and lets the devil 'ave it all 'is own way? An' don't I know 'ow, when old Nick is jes' in the thick o' the fun 'avin' a fine time with the poor silly souls o' men, the Lord suddenly comes out o' the cloud and sez, sez He: 'Now 'nuff o' this 'ere; get thee behind me!' An' then—an' then—," here Josey paused, and struck his staff violently into the earth,—"an' then there's a noise as of a mighty wind rushin', an' the angels all falls to trumpetin' an' cries: 'Alleluia! Lift up your 'eads ye everlasting gates that the King of Glory may come in!'"

The various village loafers sauntering beside their venerable prophet, listened to this outburst with respectful awe.

"He's meanderin'," said Bainton in a low tone to the portly proprietor of the "Mother Huff." "It's wonderful wot poltry there is in 'im, when 'e gives way to it!"

"Poltry" was the general term among the frequenters of the "Mother Huff" for "poetry."

"Aye, aye!" replied Buggins, somewhat condescendingly, as one who bore in mind that he was addressing a creditor. "I don't understan' poltry myself, but Josey speaks fine when he has a mind to—there's no doubt of that. Look 'ee 'ere, now; there's Ipsie Frost running' to 'im!"

And they all turned their eyes on a flying bundle of curls, rosy cheeks, fat legs and clean pinafore, that came speeding towards old Josey, with another young feminine creature scampering after it crying:

"Ipsie! Hip-po-ly-ta! Baby! Come back to your dinner!"

But Hippolyta was a person evidently accustomed to have her own way, and she ran straight up to Josey Letherbarrow as though he were the one choice hero picked out of a world.

"Zozey!" she screamed, stretching out a pair of short, mottled arms. "My own bootiful Zozey-posey! Tum and pick fowers!"

With an ecstatic shriek at nothing in particular, she caught the edge of the old man's smock.

"My Zozey," she said purringly, "'oo vezy old, but I loves 'oo!"

A smile and then a laugh went the round of the group. They were all accustomed to Ipsie's enthusiasms. Josey Letherbarrow paused a minute to allow his small admirer to take firm hold of his garments, and patted her little head with his brown wrinkled hand.

"We'se goin' sweetheartin', ain't we, Ipsie," he said gently, the beautiful smile that made his venerable face so fine and lovable, again lighting up his sunken eyes. "Come along, little lass! Come along!"

"She ain't finished her dinner!" breathlessly proclaimed a long-legged girl of about ten, who had run after the child, being one of her numerous sisters. "Mother said she was to come back straight."

"I s'ant go back!" declared Ipsie defiantly. "Zozey and me's sweetheartin'!"

Old Josey chuckled,

"That's so! So we be!" he said tranquilly. "Come along, little lass! Come along!" And to the panting sister of the tiny autocrat, he said: "You go on, my gel! I'll bring the baby, 'oldin' on jest as she is now to my smock. She won't stir more'n a fond bird wot's stickin' its little claws into ye for shelter. I'll bring 'er along 'ome, an' she'll finish 'er dinner fine, like a real good baby! Come along, little lass! Come along!"

So murmuring, the old man and young child went on together, and the group of villagers dispersed. Roger Buggins, however, paused a moment before turning up the lane which led to the "Mother Huff."

"You tell Passon," he said addressing Bainton, "you tell him as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked for layin' low on Wednesday marnin'!"

"Never fear!" responded Bainton; "I'll tell 'im. If 'tworn't Sunday, I'd tell 'im now, but its onny fair he should 'ave a bit o' peace on the seventh day like the rest of us. He'll be fair mazed like when he knows it,—aye! and I shouldn't wonder if he gave Oliver Leach a bit of 'is mind. For all that he's so quiet, there's a real devil in 'im wot the sperrit o' God keeps down,—but it's there, lurkin' low in 'is mind, an' when 'is eyes flashes blue like lightnin' afore a storm, the devil looks straight out of 'im, it do reely now!"

"Well, well!" said Buggins, tolerantly, with the dignified air of one closing the discussion. "Devil or no devil, you tell 'im as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked for layin' low on Wednesday marnin'. Good day t'ye!"

"Good day!" responded Bainton, and the two worthies parted, each to go on their several ways, Buggins to the "Mother Huff," from whose opened latticed windows the smell of roastbeef and onions, which generally composed

the Buggins' Sunday meal, came in odorous whiffs down the little lane, almost smothering the delicate perfume of the sprouting sweet-briar hedges on either side, and the nodding cowslips in the grass below; Bainton to his own cottage on the border of his master's grounds, a pretty little dwelling with a thatched roof almost overgrown with wistaria just breaking into flower. Far away from St. Rest, the greater world swung on its way; the whirl of society, politics, fashion and frivolity revolved like the wheel in a squirrel's cage, round which the poor little imprisoned animal leaps and turns incessantly in a miserable make-believe of forest freedom,—but to the old gardener who lifted the latch of his gate and went in to the Sunday dinner prepared for him by his stout and energetic help-mate, who was one of the best dairy-women in the whole countryside, there was only one grave piece of news in the universe worth considering or discussing, and that was the "layin' low of the Five Sisters."

"Never!" said Mrs. Bainton, as she set a steaming beefsteak pudding in its basin on the table and briskly untied the ends of the cloth in which it had been boiling. "Never, Tom! You don't tell me! The Five Sisters comin' down! Why, what is Oliver Leach thinking about?"

"Himself, I reckon!" responded her husband, "and his own partiklar an' malicious art o' forestry. Which consists in barin' the land as if it was a judge's chin, to be clean-shaved every marnin'. My wurrd! Won't Passon Walden be just wild! M'appen he's heard of it already, for he seems main worrited about somethin' or other. I've allus thought 'im wise-like an' sensible for a man in the Church wot ain't got much chance of knowin' the wurrld, but he *was jes'* meanderin' along to-day—*meanderin' an' jabberin'* about a meek an' quiet sperrit, as if

any of us wanted that kind o' thing 'ere! Why it's fightin' all the time! If 'tain't Sir Morton Pippitt, it's Leach, an if 'tain't Leach it's Putty Leveson—an' if 'tain't Leveson, why it's Adam Frost an' his wife, an' if 'tain't Frost an' his wife, why it's you an' me old gel! We can get up a breeze as well as any couple wot was ever jined in the bonds of 'oly matterimony! Hor-hor-hor! 'Meek an' quiet sperrit,' sez he—'have all of ye meek an' quiet sperrits!' Why he ain't got one of 'is own! Wait till he 'ears of the Five Sisters comin' down! See 'im then! Or wait till Miss Vancourt arrives an' begins to muddle round with the church!"

"Nonsense! She won't muddle round with the church," said Mrs. Bainton cheerfully, sitting down to dinner opposite her husband. "What nesh fools men are, to be sure! Everyone says she's a fine lady 'customed to all sorts of show and gaiety and the like—what will she want to do with the church? Ten to one she never goes inside it!"

"You shouldn't bet, old woman, 'tain't moral," said Bainton, with a chuckle. "You ain't got ten to bet agin one—we couldn't spare so much. If she doos nothing else, she'll dekrate the church at 'Arvest 'Ome an' Christmas—that's wot leddies allus fusses about—dekratin'. Lord, Lord! The mess they makes when they starts on it, an' the mischief they works! Tearin' down the ivy, scrattin' up the moss, pullin' an' grabbin' at the flowers wot's taken months to grow,—for all the wurrld as if they was cats out for a 'oliday. I tell ye it's been a speshul providence for us 'ere, that Passon Walden ain't got no wife,—if he 'ad, she'd a' been at the dekratin' game long afore now. An' *our* church would be jes' spoilt with a lot o' trails o' weed round it—but you mark my wurrd!

—Miss Vancourt will be dekratin' the Saint in the coffin it 'Arvest 'Ome wi' corn and pertaters an' vegetable marrers, all a-growin' and a-blowin' afore we knows it. There ain't no sense o' fitness in the feminine natur."

Mrs. Bainton laughed good-naturedly.

"That's quite true!" she agreed. "If there were, I shouldn't have made Sunday pudding for a man who talks too much to eat it while it's hot. Keep your tongue in your mouth, Tom!—use it for tastin' jes' now an' agin."

Bainton took the hint and subsided into silent enjoyment of his food. Only once again he spoke in the course of the meal, and that was during the impressive pause between pudding and cheese.

"When he knows as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked, Passon Walden's sure to do somethin'," he said.

"Aye!" responded his wife thoughtfully; "he's sure to do something."

"What d'ye think he'll do?" queried Bainton, somewhat anxiously.

"Oh, you know best, Tom," replied his buxom partner, setting a flat Dutch cheese before him and a jug of foaming beer. "There ain't no sense o' fitness in *me,* bein' a woman! You know best!"

Bainton lowered his eyes sheepishly. As usual his better half had closed the argument unanswerably.

CHAPTER VII.

SELDOM in the placid course of years had St. Rest ever belied its name, or permitted itself to suffer loss of dignity by any undue display of excitement. The arrival

of John Walden as minister of the parish,—the re-building of the church, and the discovery of the mediæval sarcophagus, which old Josey Letherbarrow always called the Sarky Fagus, together with the consecration ceremony by Bishop Brent,—were the only episodes in ten years that had moved it slightly from its normal calm. For though rumours of wars and various other mishaps and tribulations, reached it through the medium of the newspapers in the ordinary course, it concerned itself not at all with these, such matters being removed and apart from its own way of life and conduct. It was a little world in itself, and had only the vaguest interest in any other world, save perhaps the world to come, which was indeed a very real prospect to most of the villagers, their inherited tendency being towards a quaint and simple piety that was as childlike as it was sincere. The little congregation to which John Walden preached twice every Sunday was composed of as honest men and clean-minded women as could be found in all England,—men and women with straight notions of honour and duty, and warm, if plain conceptions of love, truth and family tenderness. They had their little human failings and weaknesses, thanks to Mother Nature, whose children we all are, and who set her various limitations for the best of us,—but, taken on the whole, they were peculiarly unspoilt by the iconoclastic march of progress; and "advanced" notions of doubt as to a God, and scepticism as to a future state, had never clouded their quiet minds. Walden had taken them well in hand from the beginning of his ministry,—and being much of a poet and dreamer at heart, he had fostered noble ideals among them, which he taught in simple yet attractive language, with the happiest results. The moral and mental attitude of the villagers generally was a philo

sophic cheerfulness and obedience to the will of God,—but this did not include a tame submission to tyranny, or a passive acceptance of injury inflicted upon them by merely human oppressors. Hence,—though any disturbance of the daily equanimity of their agricultural life and pursuits was quite an exceptional circumstance, the news of the "layin' low of the Five Sisters" was sufficient cause, when once it became generally known, for visible signs of trouble. In its gravity and importance it almost overtopped the advent of the new mistress of the Manor; and when on Tuesday it was whispered that "Passon Walden" had himself been to expostulate with Oliver Leach concerning the meditated murder of the famous trees, and that his expostulations had been all in vain, clouded brows and ominous looks were to be seen at every corner where the men halted on their way to the fields, or where the women gathered to gossip in the pauses of their domestic labour. Walden himself, pacing impatiently to and fro in his garden, was for once more disturbed in his mind than he cared to admit. When he had been told early on Monday morning of the imminent destruction awaiting the five noble beeches which, in their venerable and broadly-branching beauty, were one of the many glories of the woods surrounding Abbot's Manor, he was inclined to set it down to some capricious command issued by the home-coming mistress of the estate; and, in order to satisfy himself whether this was, or was not the case, he had done what was sorely against his own sense of dignity to do,—he had gone at once to interview Oliver Leach personally on the subject. But he had found that individual in the worst of all possible moods for argument, having been, as he stated, "passed over" by Miss Vancourt. That lady had not, he said, written to inform him of her in-

tended return, therefore,—so he argued,—it was not his business to be aware of it.

"Miss Vancourt hasn't told me anything, and of course I don't know anything," he said carelessly, standing in his doorway and keeping his hat on in the minister's presence. "My work is on the land, and when timber has to be felled it's my affair and nobody else's. I've been agent on these estates since the Squire's death, and I don't want to be taught my duty by any man."

"But surely your duty does not compel you to cut down five of the finest old trees in England," said Walden, hotly. "They have been famous for centuries in this neighbourhood. Have you any right to fell them without special orders?"

"Special orders?" echoed Leach with a sneer; "I've had no 'special order' for ten years at least. My employers trust me to do what I think best, and I've every right to act accordingly. The trees will begin to rot in another eighteen months or so,—just now they're in good condition and will fetch a fair price. You stick to your church, Parson Walden,—you know all about that, no doubt!—but don't come preaching to me about the felling of timber. That's my business,—not yours!"

Walden flushed, and bit his lip. His blood grew warm with indignation, and he involuntarily clenched his fist. But he suppressed his rising wrath with an effort.

"You may as well keep a civil tongue in your head, Mr. Leach—it will do you no harm!" he said quietly; "I have no wish to interfere with what you conceive to be your particular code of duty; but I think that before you destroy what can never be replaced, you should consult the owner of the trees, Miss Vancourt, especially as her return is fixed for to-morrow."

As I told you before, I know nothing about her ," replied Leach, obstinately; "I am not supposed ow. And whether she's here or away, makes no nce to me. I know what's to be done, and I shall

alden's eyes flashed. Strive as he would, he could isguise his inward contempt for this petty jack-in- —and his keen glance was, to the perverse nature ill-conditioned boor he addressed, like the lash of a on the back of a snarling cur.

I know what's to be done, and I shall do it," Leach ed in a louder tone. "And all the sentimental rot alked in the village about the Five Sisters won't make ange my mind,—no, nor all the sermons on meek uiet spirits neither! That's my last word, Mr. Walden, ou may take it for what it is worth!"

alden swung round on his heel and went his way it replying. Outwardly, he was calm enough, but lly he was in a white heat of anger. His thoughts with a passionate insistence on the grand old trees heir great canopies of foliage, where hundreds of birds annually made their homes,—where, with recurring Spring, the tender young leaves sprouted from the aged gnarled boughs, expressing the joy of that had outlived whole generations of men—where, long heats of summer broad stretches of shade lay on the soft grass, offering grateful shelter from the lay sun to the browsing cattle,—and where with the n's breath, the slow and glorious transformation of leaves to gold, with flecks of scarlet between, made ndour of colour against the pale grey-blue sky, such ists dream of and with difficulty realise. All this of God-granted natural beauty,—the growth of

centuries,—was to perish in a single morning! Surely it was a crime!—surely it was a wicked and wanton deed, for which there could be no sane excuse offered! Sorrowfully, and with bitterness, did Walden relate to his gardener, Bainton, the failure of his attempt to bring Oliver Leach to reason,—solemnly, and in subdued silence, did Bainton hear the tale.

"Well, well, Passon," he said, when his master had finished. "You doos your best for us, and no man can't say but what you've done it true ever since you took up with this 'ere village,—and you've tried to save the Five Sisters, and if 'tain't no use, why there's no more to be said. Josey Letherbarrow was for walkin' up to the Manor an' seein' Miss Vancourt herself, as soon as iver she gets within her own door,—but Lord love ye, he'd take 'arf a day to jog up there on such feet as he's got left after long wear and tear, an' there ain't no liftin' 'im into a cart nohow. Sez he to me: 'I'll see the little gel wot I used to know, and I'll tell 'er as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked, an' she'll listen to me—you see if she don't!' I was rather took with the idee myself, but I sez, sez I: 'Let alone, Josey,—you be old as Methusaleh, and you can't get up to the Manor nohow; let Passon try what he can do wi' Leach,'—and now you've been and done your best, and can't do nothin', why we must give it up altogether."

Walden walked up and down, his hands loosely clasped behind his back, lost in thought.

"We won't give it up altogether, Bainton," he said. "We'll try and find some other way——"

"There's *goin'* to be another way," declared Bainton *significantly*. "There's trouble brewin' in the village, an'

m'appen when Oliver Leach gets up to the woods to-morrow mornin' he'll find a few ready to meet 'im!"

Walden stopped abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"'Tain't for me to say;" and Bainton pretended to be very busy in pulling up one or two plantains from the lawn. "But I tells ye true, Passon, the Five Sisters ain't goin' to be laid low without a shindy!"

John's eyes sparkled. He scented battle, and was not by any means displeased.

"This is Tuesday, isn't it?" he asked abruptly. "This is the day Miss Vancourt has arranged to return?"

"It is so, sir," replied Bainton; "and it's believed the arrangements 'olds good—for change 'er mind as a woman will, 'er 'osses an' groom's arrived—and a dog as large as they make 'em, which 'is name is Plato."

Walden gave a slight gesture of annoyance. Here was a fresh cause of antipathy to the approaching Miss Vancourt. No one but a careless woman, devoid of all taste and good feeling, would name a dog after the greatest of Greek philosophers!

"Plato's a good name," went on Bainton meditatively, unconscious of the view his master was taking of that name in his own mind; "I've 'eard it somewheres before, though I couldn't tell just where. And it's a fine dog. I was up at the Manor this mornin' lookin' round the grounds, just to see 'ow they'd been a-gettin' on—and really it isn't so bad considerin', and I was askin' a question or two of Spruce, and he showed me the dog lyin' on the steps of the Manor, lookin' like a lion's baby snoozin' in the sun, and waitin' as wise as ye like for his mistress. He don't appear at all put out by new faces or new grounds—he's took to the place quite nat'ral."

"You saw Spruce early, then?"

"Yes, sir, I see Spruce, and arter 'ollerin' 'ard at 'im for 'bout ten minutes, he sez, sez he, as gentle as a child sez he: 'Yes, the Five Sisters is a-comin' down to-morrow mornin', and we's all to be there a quarter afore six with ropes and axes.'"

John started walking up and down again.

"When is Miss Vancourt expected?" he enquired.

"At tea-time this arternoon," replied Bainton. "The train arrives at Riversford at three o'clock, if so be it isn't behind its time,—and if the lady gets a fly from the station, which if she ain't ordered it afore, m'appen she won't get it, she'll be 'ere 'bout four."

Instinctively Walden glanced at his watch. It was just two o'clock. Another hour and the antipathetic "Squire-ess" would be actually on her way to the village! He heaved a short sigh. Forebodings of evil infected the air,—impending change, disturbing and even disastrous to St. Rest, suggested itself troublously to his mind. Arguing inwardly with himself, he presently began to think that notwithstanding all his attempts to live a Christian life, after the manner Christianly, he was surely becoming a very selfish and extremely narrow-minded man! He was unreasonably, illogically vexed at the return of the heiress of Abbot's Manor; and why? Why, chiefly because he would no longer be able to walk at liberty in Abbot's Manor gardens and woods,—because there would be another personality perhaps more dominant than his own in the little village, and because—yes!—because he had a particular aversion to women of fashion, such as Miss Vancourt undoubtedly must be, to judge from the brief exhibition of her wardrobe which, through the guilelessness of Mrs. Spruce, had been displayed before his reluctant eyes. Yet these ob-

jections were after all really rooted in masculine selfishness, —the absorbing selfishness of old bachelorhood, which had grown round him like a shell, shutting him out altogether from the soft influences of feminine attraction,—so much so indeed that he had even come to look upon his domestic indoor servants as obliging machines rather than women, —machines which it was necessary to keep well oiled with food and wages, but which could scarcely be considered as entering into his actual life more than the lawn-mower or the roasting-jack. Yet he was invariably kind to all his dependants,—invariably thoughtful of all their needs,— nevertheless he maintained a certain aloofness from them, not only because he was by nature reserved, but because he judged reserve necessary in order to uphold respect. In sickness or trouble, no one could be more quietly helpful or consolatory than he; and in the company of children he threw off all restraint and was as a child himself in the heartiness and spontaneity of his mirth and good humour,—but with all women, save the very aged and matronly, he generally found himself at a loss, uncertain what to say to them, and equally uncertain as to how far he might accept or believe what they said to him. The dark eyes of a sparkling brunette embarrassed him as much as the dreamy blue orbs of a lily-like blonde,—they were curious dazzlements that got into his way at times, and made him doubtful as to whether any positive sincerity ever could or ever would lurk behind such bewildering brief flashes of light which appeared to shine forth without meaning, and vanish again without result. And in various ways,—so he now began to assure himself,—he must certainly have grown inordinately, outrageously selfish! —his irritation at the prospective return of Miss Vancourt

proved it. He determined to brace
put the lurking devil of egotism down-

"Put it down!" he said inwardly
—"put it down—trample it under fo
The lady of the Manor is perhaps ser
patience and prove the stuff that is i
child,—she is twenty-seven years of
woman,—she will have her ways, just
—she will probably rub every mental
the skin of your soul awry,—but that
you want, John,—you do indeed! you
more irritating than Sir Morton Pippitt's
to keep you clean of an overgrowth or a
fads. Your powers of endurance are ab
the test, and you must come out strong,
not allow yourself to become a querulou
cause you cannot always do exactly as yo

He smiled genially at his own mental
self, and addressing Bainton once more, s

"I shall probably write a note to Mis
afternoon, and send you up with it. I sh
about the Five Sisters, and ask her to give
cutting down of the trees may be delayed ti
them for herself. But don't say anything
the village," here he paused a moment, an
with greater emphasis—"I don't want to
anything anybody else may have on hand. D
stand? We must save the old beeches som
do my best, but I may fail;—Miss Vancourt r
my letter, or if she does, she may not be
attend to it; it is best that all ways and mean
tried,——"

eight-day clock in the
ree o'clock! The train
, was timed to reach
is not late, which it
snoozing peacefully
sunlight, suddenly
to the lawn, sniffing
lden watched him

n Miss Vancourt's
made him smile.
ertainly more in-
unnot write even
nplace ordinary
that Miss Van-
e nor ordinary,
et thee behind
ld better not
verbal mes-
t turn to it,
'l be much

d, and he
f sheet of
pts to ad-
failures.
nan form
ght to be
agine it!
How un-

r forbore to continue conversation
onal theme. He retired into his
ment the stiffest, most clerical, and
Miss Vancourt that he could possibly
the very greatest reluctance to attempt
with a sheet of notepaper before him
at it without formulating any coup

mencement. Then he began: "The Rev. John presents his compliments to Miss Vancourt, and inform her——"

No, that would never do! "Begs to inform sounded almost threatening. The Rev. John Walde "beg to inform her" that she had no business t pink shoes with high heels, for example. He de one half sheet of paper, put the other half econc aside to serve as a stray leaflet for "church memo and commenced in a different strain.

"Dear Madam,"—

"Dear Madam"! He looked at the two words i annoyance. They were very ugly. Addressed to a who wore pink shoes, they seemed singularly abrup if Miss Vancourt should chance to resemble in t her ancestress, Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecou were wholly unsuitable. A creditor might write Madam" to a customer in application for an outs bill,—but to Mary Elia Adelgisa one would surel —Ah!—now how would one begin? He paused the end of his penholder. Another half sheet of no was wasted, and equally another half sheet dev "church memoranda," he began:

"Dear Miss Vancourt,"—

At this, he threw down his pen altogether familiar! By all the gods of Greece, whom he h believed in even while studying Divinity at Oxford, deal too familiar!

"It is just as if I knew her!" he said to hi vexation. "And I don't know her! And what's don't want to know her! If it were not for this l of the Five Sisters, I wouldn't go near her. Pos *wouldn't!*"

A mellow chime from the old eight-day clock in the outer hall struck on the silence. Three o'clock! The train by which Miss Vancourt would arrive, was timed to reach Riversford station at three,—if it was not late, which it generally was. Nebbie, who had been snoozing peacefully near the study window in a patch of sunlight, suddenly rose, shook himself, and trotted out onto the lawn, sniffing the air with ears and tail erect. Walden watched him abstractedly.

"Perhaps he scents a future enemy in Miss Vancourt's dog, Plato!" And this whimsical idea made him smile. "He is quite intelligent enough. He is certainly more intelligent than I am this afternoon, for I cannot write even a commonplace ordinary note to a commonplace ordinary woman." Here a sly brain-devil whispered that Miss Vancourt might possibly be neither commonplace nor ordinary, —but he put the suggestion aside with a "Get thee behind me, Satan" inflexibility. "The fact is, I had better not write to her at all. I'll send Bainton with a verbal message; he is sure to give a quaint and pleasant turn to it, —he knew her father, and I didn't;—it will be much better to send Bainton."

Having made this resolve, his brow cleared, and he was more satisfied. Tearing up the last half sheet of wasted notepaper he had spoilt in futile attempts to address the lady of the Manor, he laughed at his failures.

"Even if it were etiquette to use the old Roman form of correspondence, which some people think ought to be revived, it wouldn't do in this case," he said. "Imagine it! 'John Walden to Maryllia Vancourt,—Greeting!' How unutterably, how stupendously ridiculous it would look!"

He shut *all his writing* materials in his desk, and fol*lowing Nebbie out to the* lawn, seated himself with a vo-

lume of *Owen Meredith* in his hand. He was soon absorbed. Yet every now and again his thoughts strayed to the Five Sisters, and with persistent fidelity of detail his mind's eye showed him the grassy knoll so soft to the tread, where the doomed trees stood proudly and gracefully, clad just at this season all in a glorious panoply of young green,—where, as the poet whose tender word melodies he was reading might have said of the surroundings:

> "For moisture of sweet showers,
> All the grass is thick with flowers."

"Yes, I shall send Bainton up to the Manor with a civil message," he mused—"and he can—and certainly will—add anything else to it he likes. Of course the lady may be offended,—some women take offence at anything—but I don't much care if she is. My conscience will not reproach me for having warned her of the impending destruction of one of the most picturesque portions of her property. But personally, I shall not write to her, nor will I go to see her. I shall have to pay a formal call, of course, in a week or two,—but I need not go inside the Manor for that. To leave my card, as minister of the parish, will be quite sufficient."

He turned again to the volume in his hand. His eyes fell casually on a verse in the poem of "Resurrection":

> "The world is filled with folly and sin;
> And Love must cling where it can, I say,—
> For Beauty is easy enough to win,
> But one isn't loved every day."

He sighed involuntarily. Then to banish an unacknowledged regret, he began to criticise his author.

' the world and the ambitions of diplomatic service
ɔt stepped in between Lord Lytton and his muse,
ıld have been a fine poet," he said half aloud.
y he was not born obscurely and in poverty—he
have been wholly great, instead of as now, merely
gifted. He missed his true vocation. So many of
likewise. I often wonder whether I have missed
,

t this idea brooked no consideration. He knew very
ıat he had made no mistake in his choice of the
ı as a field of labour. He loved his work, and
pleasure in all that appertained to it; its simplest
'as a charm to him, and he took a special delight
ıg to teach and elevate the humblest soul under his
, not only to a higher, but also to a more cheerful
tion of life and duty than was generally inculcated
fellows. The love of God, not the wrath of God,
ıe dominant note of his ministry to St. Rest,—what
r then that the people he instructed loved him as
ponent of that greater Love upon Whom they were
ed to rely for safety in this world and in the world
ıe. No,—he had not mistaken his vocation. He
e very man for it. Many of his calling and election
have taken a lesson from him in the whole art or
ɜh ministration to the needs of others. But with all
ɟh spiritual aim, he was essentially human, and plea-
conscious of his own failings and obstinacies. He
t hold himself as above the weaker brethren, but as
ith them, and of them. And through the steady
nance of this mental attitude, he found himself able
ticipate in ordinary emotions, ordinary interests and
ry lives with more than the usual sympathy dis-
by the ministers of small and outlying parishes in

the concerns of the people committed to their charge. It is not too much to say that though he was in himself distinctly reserved and apart from the average majority of men, the quiet exercise of his influence over the village of St. Rest had resulted in so attracting and fastening the fibres of love and confidence in all the hearts about him to his own, that anything of serious harm occurring to himself, would have been considered in the light of real fatality and ruin to the whole community. When a clergyman can succeed in establishing such complete trust and sympathy between himself and his parishioners, there can be no question of his fitness for the high vocation to which he has been ordained. When, on the contrary, one finds a village or town where the inhabitants are split up into small and quarrelsome sects, and are more or less in a state of objective ferment against the minister who should be their ruling head, the blame is presumably more with the minister than with those who dispute his teaching, inasmuch as he must have fallen far below the expected standard in some way or other, to have thus incurred general animosity.

"If all fails," mused Walden presently, his thoughts again reverting to the Five Sisters' question,—"If Bainton does his errand awkwardly,—if the lady will not see him, —if any one of the thousand things do happen that are quite likely to happen, and so spoil all chance of interceding with Miss Vancourt to spare the trees,—why then I will go myself to-morrow morning to the scene of intended massacre before six o'clock. I will be there before an axe is lifted! And if Bainton meant anything at all by his hint, others will be there too! Yes!—I shall go,—*in fact it will be my duty to go in case of a row.*"

A smile showed itself under his silver-brown moustache,

The idea of a row seemed not altogether unpleasant to him. He stooped and patted his dog playfully.

"Nebuchadnezzar!" he said, with mock solemnity; whereat Nebbie, lying at his feet, opened one eye, blinked it lazily and wagged his tail—"Nebuchadnezzar, I think our presence will be needed to-morrow morning at an early hour, in attendance on the Five Sisters! Do you hear me, Nebuchadnezzar?" Again Nebbie blinked. "Good! That wink expresses understanding. We shall have to be there, in case of a row."

Nebbie yawned, stretched out his paws, and closed both eyes in peaceful slumber. It was a beautiful afternoon;—"sufficient for the day was the evil thereof" according to Nebbie. The Reverend John turned over a few more pages of *Owen Meredith,* and presently came to the conclusion that he would go punting. The decision was no sooner arrived at than he prepared to carry it out. Nebbie awoke with a start from his doze to see his master on the move, and quickly trotted after him across the lawn to the river. Here, the sole occupant of the shining stream was a maternal swan, white as a cloud on the summit of Mont Blanc, floating in stately ease up and down the water, carrying her young brood of cygnets on her back, under the snowy curve of her arching wings. Walden unchained the punt and sprang into it,—Nebbie dutifully following,—and then divested himself of his coat. He was just about to take the punting pole in hand, when Bainton's figure suddenly emerged from the shrubbery.

"Off on the wild wave, Passon, are ye?" he observed. "Well, it's a fine day for it! M'appen you ain't seen the corpses of four rats anywhere around? No? Then I 'spect their lovin' relations must ha' been and ate 'em up, which may be their pertikler way of doin' funerals. I

nabbed 'em all last night in new traps of my own invention. Mebbe the lilies will be all the better for their loss. I'll be catchin' some more this evenin'. Lord! Passon, if you was to 'old out offers of a shillin' a head, the rats 'ud be gone in no time,—an' the lilies too!"

Walden absorbed in getting his punt out, only smiled and nodded acquiescingly.

"The train must ha' been poonctual," went on Bainton, staring stolidly at the shining water. "Amazin' poonctual for once in its life. For a one 'oss fly, goin' at a one 'oss fly pace, 'as jes' passed through the village, and is jiggitin' up to the Manor this very minute. I s'pose Miss Vancourt's inside it."

Walden paused,—punt-pole in hand.

"Yes, I suppose she is," he rejoined. "Come to me at six o'clock, Bainton. I shall want you."

"Very good, sir!"

The pole splashed in the water,—the punt shot out into the clear stream,—Nebbie gave two short barks, as was his custom when he found himself being helplessly borne away from dry land,—and in a few seconds Walden had disappeared round one of the bends of the river. Bainton stood ruminating for a minute.

"Jest a one 'oss fly, goin' at a one 'oss fly pace!" he repeated, slowly. "It's a cheap way of comin' 'ome to one's father's 'Alls—jest in a one 'oss fly! She might ha' ordered a kerridge an' pair by telegram, an' dashed it up in fine style, but a one 'oss fly! It do take the edge off a 'ome-comin'!—it do reely now."

And with a kind of short grunt at the vanity and disappointment of human expectations, he went his way to the kitchen garden, there to "chew the cud of sweet and

bitter memory" over the asparagus beds, which were in a highly promising condition.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE one-horse fly, going at a one-horse fly pace, had made its way with comfortable jaunting slowness from Riversford to St. Rest, its stout, heavy-faced driver being altogether unconscious that his fare was no less a personage than Miss Vancourt, the lady of the Manor. When a small, girlish person, clad in a plain, close-fitting garb of navy-blue serge, and wearing a simple yet coquettish dark straw hat to match, accosted him at the Riversford railway station with a brief, "Cab, please," and sprang into his vehicle, he was a trifle sulky at being engaged in such a haphazard fashion by an apparently insignificant young female who had no luggage, not so much as a handbag.

"Wheer be you a-goin'?" he demanded, turning his bull neck slowly round. "I baint pertikler for a far journey."

"Aren't you?" and the young lady smiled. "You must drive me to St. Rest,——Abbot's Manor, please!"

The heavy-faced driver paused, considering. Should he perform the journey, or should he not? Perhaps it would be wisest to undertake the job,—there was the 'Mother Huff' at the end of the journey, and Roger Buggins was a friend of his. Yes,—he would take the risk of conveying the humbly-clad female up to the Manor; he had heard rumours that the old place was once again to be inhabited, and that the mistress of it was daily expected;—*this* person in the blue serge was *probably one of her* messengers or retainers.

"My fare's ten shillings," he observed, still peering round distrustfully. "It's a good seven mile up hill and down dale."

"All right!" responded the young woman, cheerfully. "You shall have ten shillings. Only please begin to go, won't you?"

This request was accompanied by an arch smile, and a flash of blue eyes from under the dark straw hat brim. Whereat the cumbrous Jehu was faintly moved to a responsive grin.

"She ain't bad-looking, neither!" he muttered to himself,—and he was in a somewhat better humour when at last he condescended to start. His vehicle was a closed one, and though he fully expected his passenger would put her head out of the window, when the horse was labouring up-hill, and entreat him to go faster,—which habit he had found by experience was customary to woman in a one-horse fly,—nothing of the kind happened on this occasion. The person in the blue serge was evidently both patient and undemonstrative. Whether the horse crawled or slouched, or trotted,—whether the fly dragged, or bumped, or jolted, she made no sign. When St. Rest was reached at last, and the driver whipped his steed into a semblance of spirit, and drove through the little village with a clatter, two or three people came to the doors of their cottages and looked at the vehicle scrutinisingly, wondering whether its occupant was, or was not Miss Vancourt. But a meaning wink from the sage on the box intimated that they need not trouble themselves,—the "fare" was no one of the least importance. Presently, the fine old armorial gates of the drive which led up to Abbot's Manor were reached,—they were set wide open, this having been done according to Mr

Spruce's orders. A woman at the lodge came hastily out, but the cab had passed her before she had time to see who was in it. Up through the grand avenue of stately oaks and broad-branching elms, whose boughs, rich with the budding green, swayed in the light wind with a soft rustling sound as of sweeping silks on velvet, the unostentatious vehicle jogged slowly,—it was a steady ascent all the way, and the driver was duly considerate of his animal's capabilities. At last came the turn in the long approach, which showed the whole width of the Manor, with its ancient rose-brick frontage and glorious oaken gables shining in the warm afternoon sunlight,—the old Tudor courtyard spreading before it, its grey walls and paving-stones half hidden in a wilderness of spring blossom. Here, too, the gates were open, and the one-horse fly made its lumbering and awkward entrance within, drawing up with a jerk at the carved portico. The young person in blue serge jumped out, purse in hand.

"Ten shillings, I think?" she said; but before the driver could answer her, the great iron-clamped door of the Manor swung open, and a respectable retainer in black stood on the threshold.

"Oh, will you pay the driver, please?" said the young lady, addressing this functionary. "He says his fare is ten shillings. I daresay he would like an extra five shillings for himself as well," and she smiled—"Here it is!"

She handed the money to the personage in black, who was no other than the former butler to Sir Morton Pippitt, now at the Manor on "temp'ry service," and who in turn presented it with an official stateliness to the startled fly-man, who was just waking up to the fact that his fare, whom he had considered as a person of no account *whatever, was the* actual mistress of the Manor.

"Drive out to the left of the court," said the butler imperatively; "reverse way to which you entered."

The submissive Jehu prepared to obey. The young person in blue serge smiled up at him.

"Good afternoon!" said she.

"Same to you mum!" he replied, touching his cap. "And thank ye kindly!"

Whereat, his stock of eloquence being exhausted, he whipped up his steed to a gallop and departed in haste for the "Mother Huff," full of eagerness to relate the news of Miss Vancourt's arrival, further embellished by the fact that he had himself driven her up from the station, "all unbeknown like."

Miss Vancourt herself, meanwhile, stepped into her ancestral halls, and stood for a moment, silent, looking round her with a wistful, almost pathetic earnestness.

"Tea is served in the morning-room, madam," said the butler, respectfully, all the time wondering whether this slight, childlike-looking creature was really Miss Vancourt, or some young friend of hers sent as an advance herald of her arrival. "Mrs. Spruce thought you would find it comfortable there."

"Mrs. Spruce!" exclaimed the girl, eagerly. "Where is she?"

"Here, ma'am—here, my lady," said a quavering voice —and Mrs. Spruce, presenting quite a comely and maternal aspect in her best black silk gown, and old-fashioned cap, with lace lappels, such as the late Squire had always insisted on her wearing, came forward curtseying nervously.

"I hope, ma'am, you've had a pleasant journey——"

But her carefully prepared sentence was cut short by a pair of arms being flung suddenly round her, and a fresh face pressed against her own.

"Dear Mrs. Spruce! I am so glad to see you! You knew me when I was quite a little thing, didn't you? And you knew my father, too! You were very fond of my father, weren't you? I am sure you were! You must try to be fond of me now!"

Never, as Mrs. Spruce was afterwards wont to declare, had she been so "took back," as by the unaffected spontaneity and sweetness of this greeting on the part of the new mistress, whose advent she had so greatly feared. She went, to quote her own words, "all of a fluster like, and near busted out cryin'. It was like a dear lovin' little child comin' 'ome, and made me feel that queer you might have knocked me down with a soap-bubble!"

Whatever the worthy woman's feelings were, and however much the respectable butler, whose name was Primmins, might have been astonished in his own stately mind at Miss Vancourt's greeting of her father's old servant, Miss Vancourt herself was quite unconscious of any loss of dignity on her own part.

"I am so glad!" she repeated. "It's like finding a friend at home to find you, Spruce! I had quite forgotten what you looked like, but I begin to remember now—you were always nice and kind, and you always managed so well, didn't you? Yes, I am sure you did! The man said tea was in the morning-room. You come and pour it out for me, like a dear old thing! I'm going to live alone in my own home now for always,—for always!" she repeated, emphatically. "Nobody shall ever take me away from it again!"

She linked her arm confidingly in that of Mrs. Spruce, who for once was too much astonished to speak,—Miss *Vancourt was so entirely* different to the chill and reserved

personage her imagination had depicted, that she was quite at a loss how to look or what to say.

"Is this the way?" asked Maryllia, stepping lightly past the stuffed knight in armour. "Yes? I thought it was! I begin to remember everything now! Oh, how I wish I had never gone away from this dear old home!"

She entered the morning-room, guiding Mrs. Spruce, rather than being guided by her,—for as that worthy woman averred to Primmins at supper that self-same night: "I was so all in a tremble and puspration with 'er 'oldin' on to my arm and takin' me round, that I was like the man in the Testymen what had dumb devils,—and scarcely knew what ground my feet was a-fallin' on!" The cheerful air of welcome which pervaded this charming, sunny apartment, with its lattice windows fronting the wide stretch of velvety lawn, terrace and park-land, delighted Maryllia, and she loosened her hold on Mrs. Spruce's arm with a little cry of pleasure, as a huge magnificently coated Newfoundland dog rose from his recumbent position near the window, and came to greet her with slow and expansive waggings of his great plumy tail.

"Plato, my beauty!" she exclaimed. "How do you like Abbot's Manor, boy? Eh? Quite at home, aren't you! Good dog! Isn't he a king of dogs?" And she turned her smiling face on Mrs. Spruce. "A real king! I bought him because he was so big! Weren't you frightened when you saw such a monster?—and didn't you think he would bite everybody on the least provocation? But he wouldn't, you know! He's a perfect darling —as gentle as a lamb! He would kill anyone that wanted to hurt me—oh, yes of course!—that's why I love him!"

And she patted the enormous creature's broad head *tenderly.*

"He's my only true friend!" she continued. "Money wouldn't buy *his* fidelity!" Here, glancing at Mrs. Spruce, she laughed merrily. "Dear Mrs. Spruce! You *do* look so uncomfortable!—so—so warm! It *is* warm, isn't it? Make me some tea!—tea cools one, they say, though it's hot to drink at first. We'll talk afterwards!"

Mrs. Spruce, with some inaudible murmurings, hastened to the tea-tray, and tried to compose her agitated nerves by bringing her attention to bear on the silver tea-kettle which Primmins had just brought in, and in which the water was beginning to bubble, in obedience to the newly-kindled flame of the spirit-lamp beneath. Maryllia, meanwhile, stepped out on the grass terrace in front of the window, with the dog Plato at her side, and looked long and earnestly at the fair stretch of woodland scenery before her. While she thus stood absorbed, Mrs. Spruce stole covert glances at her with increased wonder and bewilderment. She looked much younger than her twenty-seven years,—her childlike figure and face portrayed her as about eighteen, not more. She stood rather under than over the medium height of woman,—yet she gave the impression of being taller than she actually was, owing to the graceful curve of her arched neck, which rose from her shoulders with a daintily-proud poise, marking her demeanour as exceptional and altogether different to that of ordinary women. Her back being turned to Mrs. Spruce for the moment, that sagacious dame decided that she was "real stately, for all that she was small," and also noted that her hair, coiled loosely in a thick knot, which pushed itself with rebellious fulness beyond the close-fitting edge of the dark straw hat she wore, was of a warm auburn gold, rippling here and there into shades of darker brown.

Suddenly, with a decided movement, she turned from the terrace and re-entered the morning-room.

"Tea ready?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am!—yes, miss—my lady—it's just made—perhaps it's best to let it draw a bit——"

"I don't like it strong!" said Maryllia, sitting down, and leisurely taking off her hat. "And you mustn't call me 'my lady.' I'm not the daughter of an earl, or the wife of a knight. If I were Scotch, I might say 'I'm McIntosh of McIntosh;' or some other Mac of Mac,—but being English, I'm Vancourt of Vancourt! And you must call me 'Miss,' till I become 'Ma'am.' I don't want to bear any unnecessary dignities before my time! In fact, I think you'd better call me Miss Maryllia, as you used to do when my father was alive."

"Very well, ma'am—miss—Miss Maryllia," faltered Mrs. Spruce, fumbling distractedly with the tea-things, and putting cream and sugar recklessly into three or four cups without thinking. "There! Really, I don't know what I am a-doin' of—do you like cream and sugar, my dear?—beggin' your parding—Miss Maryllia?"

"Yes, I like cream and sugar both," replied the young lady, with a mirthful gleam in her eyes, as she noted the old housekeeper's confusion. "But don't spoil the tea with either. If you put too much cream, you will make the tea cold,—if you put too much sugar, you will make it syrupy,—you must arrive at the *juste milieu* in a cup of tea! I am *very* particular!"

Poor Mrs. Spruce grew warmer and redder in the face than ever. What was the *"juste milieu?"* Often and often afterwards did she puzzle over that remarkable phrase.

"I think," continued Maryllia, with a dimpling smile,

"if you put one lump of sugar in the cup and two brimming teaspoonfuls of cream, it will be exactly right!"

Gladly, and with relief, Mrs. Spruce obeyed these explicit instructions, and handed her new mistress the desired refreshment with assiduous and respectful care.

"You are a dear!" said Maryllia, lazily taking the cup from her hand. "Just the kindest and nicest of persons! And good-tempered? I am sure you are good-tempered, aren't you?"

"Pretty well so, Miss," responded Mrs. Spruce, now gaining courage to look at the fair smiling face opposite her own, more squarely and openly. "Leastways, I've been told I keeps my 'ead under any amount of kitchen jawin'. For, as you may believe me, in a kitchen where there's men as well as women, an' a servants' 'all leadin' straight through from the kitchen, jawin' there is and jawin' there must be, and such bein' the Lord's will, we must put up with it. But it wants a 'ead to keep things straight, and I generally arranges pretty well, though I'll not deny but I'm a bit flustered to-day,—howsomever, it will soon be all right, and anythink that's wrong, Miss, if you will be so good as to tell me——"

"I will!" said Maryllia, sweetly; and she leaned back in her chair, whimsically surveying the garrulous old dame with eyes which Mrs. Spruce then and there discovered to be "the most beautiful blue eyes ever seen."—"I will tell you all I *do* like, and all I *don't* like. I'm sure we shall get on well together. The tea is perfect,—and this room is exquisite. In fact, everything is delightful, and I'm so happy to be in my own home once more! I wish I had never left it!"

Her eyes darkened suddenly, and she sighed. Mrs. Spruce watched her in submissive silence, realising as she

gazed that Miss Maryllia was "a real beauty and no mistake." Why and how she came to that conclusion, she could not very well have explained. Her ideas of feminine loveliness were somewhat hazy and restricted. She privately considered her own girl, Kitty, "the handsomest lass in all the country-side" and she had been known to bitterly depreciate what she called "the pink and white dolly-face" of Susie Prescott, the acknowledged young belle of the village. But there was an indefinable air of charm about her new lady which was quite foreign to all her experience, —a bewildering grace and ease of manner arising from high education and social cultivation, that confused her and robbed her of all her usual self-sufficiency; and for once in her life she checked her customary volubility and decided that it was perhaps best to say as little as possible till she saw exactly how things were going to turn out. Miss Maryllia was very kind,—but who could tell whether she was not also capricious? There was something slightly quizzical as well as sweet in her smile,—something subtle—something almost mysterious. She had greeted her father's old servant as affectionately as a child, —but her enthusiasm might be only temporary. So Mrs. Spruce vaguely reflected as she stood with her hands folded on her apron, waiting for the next word. That next word came with a startling suddenness.

"Oh, you wicked Spruce! How could you!"

And Maryllia, springing up from her chair, made a bound to the opposite corner of the room, where there was a tall vase filled with peacocks' feathers. Gathering all these in her hand, she flourished them dramatically in the old housekeeper's face.

"*The most* unlucky things in the world!" she exclaimed. "Peacocks' feathers! How could you allow them

to be in this room on the very day of my return! It's dreadful!—quite dreadful!—you know it is! Nothing is quite so awful as a peacock's feather!"

Mrs. Spruce stared, gasped and blinked,—her hand involuntarily wandered to her side in search for convenient "spasms."

"They've always been 'ere, Miss," she stammered. "I 'adn't no idee as 'ow you wouldn't like them, though to tell the truth, I *'ave* 'eard somethin' about their bein' on-lucky——"

"Unlucky! I should think so!" replied Maryllia, holding the objectionable plumes as far away from herself as possible.—"No wonder we've been unfortunate, if these feathers were always in the old house! No wonder everything went wrong! I must break the spell at once and for ever. Are there more of these horrible 'witch-eyes' in any of the rooms?"

Poor Mrs. Spruce made a great effort to cudgel her memory. She was affected by "a palpitation," as she expressed it. There was her newly-arrived mistress confronting her with the authoritative air of a young empress, holding the bunch of glittering peacocks' plumes aloft, like a rod uplifted for summary chastisement, and asking her to instantly remember whether there were any more "horrible witch-eyes" about. Mrs. Spruce had never before heard such a term applied to the tail-sheddings of the imperial fowl,—but she never forgot it, and never afterwards saw a peacock's feather without a qualm.

"I couldn't say, Miss; I'm not sure—" she answered flutteringly. "But I'll have every 'ole and corner searched to-morrow——"

"No, to-night!" said Maryllia, with determination, "I *will not sleep in the house if one* peacock's feather remains

in it! There!" Her brows were bent tragically;—in another moment she laughed. "Take them away!" she continued, picking up Mrs. Spruce's apron at the corners and huddling all the glittering plumage into its capacious folds. "Take them all away! And go right through the house, and collect every remaining feather you can find—and then—and then——"

Here she paused dubiously. "You mustn't burn them, you know! That would be unluckier still!"

"Lor! Would it now, Miss? I never should 'ave thought it!" murmured Mrs. Spruce, plaintively, grasping her apronful of "horrible witch-eyes." "What on earth shall I do with them?"

Maryllia considered. Very pretty she looked at that moment, with one small finger placed meditatively on her lips, which were curved close like a folded rosebud. "You must either bury them, or drown them!" she said at last, with the gravest decision. "If you drown them, you must tie them to a stone, so that they will not float. If you bury them, you must dig ten feet deep! You must really! If you don't, they will all come up again, and the eyes will be all over the place, haunting you!" Here she broke into the merriest little laugh possible. "Poor Spruce! You do look so miserable! See here—I'll tell you what to do! Pack them all in a box, and I will send them to my aunt Emily. She loves them! She likes to see them stuck all over the drawing-room. They're never unlucky to her. She has a fellow-feeling for peacocks; there is a sort of affinity between herself and them! Pack up every feather you can find, Spruce! The box must go to-night by parcels' post. Address to Mrs. Fred Vancourt, at the *Langham Hotel*. She's staying there just now. Will you *be sure to* send them off to-night?"

She held up her little white hand entreatingly, and her blue eyes, wonderfully sweet and childlike, yet grave and passionate, looked straight into the elder woman's wrinkled apple face.

"When she looked at me like that, I'd a' gone barefoot to kingdom-come for her!" Mrs. Spruce afterwards declared to some of her village intimates—"And as for the peacocks' feathers, I'd a' scrubbed through the 'ole 'ouse from top to bottom afore I'd a' let one be in it!"

To Maryllia, she said:

"You may take my word for it, Miss! They'll all go out of the 'ouse 'fore seven o'clock. I'll send them myself to the post."

"Thank you, *so* much!" said Maryllia, with a comical little sigh of relief. "And now, Spruce, I will go to my bedroom and lie down for an hour. I'm just a little tired. Have you managed to get a maid for me?"

"Well, Miss, there's jest a gel—she don't know anythink much, but she's 'andy and willin' and 'umble, and quick with her needle, and tidy at foldin', and got a good character. She's the best I could do, Miss. Her name is Nancy Pyrle—I'll send her to you directly."

"Yes, do!" answered Miss Vancourt, with a little yawn. "And show me to my rooms;—you prepared the ones I told you—my mother's rooms?"

"Yes, Miss," answered Mrs. Spruce in subdued accents; "I've made them all fresh and sweet and clean; but of course the furniture is left jest as it was when the Squire locked 'em all up after he lost his lady——"

Maryllia said nothing, but followed the housekeeper upstairs, the great dog Plato in attendance on her steps. On reaching the bedroom, hung with faded rose silk hang-

ings, and furnished with sixteenth century oak, she looked at everything with a curious wistfulness and reverence. Approaching the dressing-table, she glanced at her own reflection in the mirror; but fair as the reflection was that glanced back at her, she gave it no smile. She was serious and absorbed, and her eyes were clouded with a sudden mist of tears. Mrs. Spruce took the opportunity to slip away with her collection of peacocks' feathers, and descended in haste to the kitchen, where for some time the various orders she issued caused much domestic perturbation, and fully expressed the chaotic condition of her own mind. The maid, Nancy Pyrle, was hustled off to "wait on Miss Vancourt upstairs, and don't be clumsy with your 'ands, whatever you do!"—Primmins, the butler, was sent to remove the tea-things from the morning-room,—at which command he turned round somewhat indignantly, asking "who are you a-orderin' of; don't you think I know my business?"—Spruce himself, unhappily coming by chance to the kitchen door to ask if it was really true that Miss Vancourt had arrived, was shrilly told to "go along and mind his own business,"—and so it happened that when Bainton appeared, charged with the Reverend John Walden's message concerning the Five Sisters, he might as well have tried to obtain an unprepared audience with the King, as to see or speak with the lady of the Manor. Miss Vancourt had arrived—oh yes, she had certainly arrived, Mrs. Spruce told him, with much heat and energy; but she was tired and was lying down, and certainly could not be asked to see anyone, no matter what the business was. And to make things more emphatic, at the very time that Bainton was urging his cause, and Mrs. Spruce was firmly *rejecting it,* Nancy Pyrle came down from attendance on *her mistress* and said that Miss Vancourt was going to

sleep a little, and did not wish to be disturbed till she rang her bell.

"Oh, and she's beautiful!" said Nancy, drawing a long breath,—"and so very kind! She showed me how to do all she wanted—and was that patient and gentle! She says I'll make quite a good maid after a bit!"

"Well, I hope to the Lord you will!" said Mrs. Spruce with a sniff. "For it's a chance in a 'undred, comin' straight out of the village to a first situation with a lady like Miss Vancourt. And I 'ope you'll profit by it. And if you 'adn't taken the prize for needlework in the school, you wouldn't 'ave 'ad it, so now you sees what good it doos to serve your elders when you're young." Here she turned to Bainton, who was standing disconsolately half in and half out of the kitchen doorway. "I'm real sorry, Mr. Bainton, that you can't see our lady, more 'specially as you wishes to give a message from Passon Walden himself —but you jest go back and tell 'im 'ow it is;—Miss Vancourt is restin' and can't be disturbed nohow."

Bainton twirled his cap nervously in his hand.

"I s'pose no one couldn't say to her quiet-like as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked?——"

Mrs. Spruce raised her fat hands with a gesture of dismay.

"Lor' bless the man!" she exclaimed. "D'ye think we're goin' to worrit Miss Vancourt with the likes o' that the very first evenin' she's set foot in 'er own 'ouse? Why, we dussn't! An' that there great dog Plato lyin' on guard outside 'er door! I've 'ad enough to-day with peacocks' feathers, let alone the Five Sisters! Besides, Oliver Leach is agent 'ere, and what he says is sure to be done. She won't worry 'erself about it,—and you may be pretty certain he *won't be interfered with.* You tell Passon *Walden I'm real sorry,* but it can't be 'elped."

Reluctantly, Bainton turned away. He was never much disposed for a discussion with Mrs. Spruce,—her mind was too illogical, and her tongue too persistent. Her allusion to peacocks' feathers was unintelligible to him, and he wondered whether "anythink she's been an' took" had gone to her head. Anyway, his errand was foiled for the moment. But he was not altogether disheartened. He determined not to go back to Walden with his message quite undelivered.

"Where there's a will, there's a way!" he said to himself. "I'll go and do a bit of shoutin' to Spruce,—deaf as he is, he's more reasonable-like than his old 'ooman!"

With this resolve, he went his way by a short-cut through Abbot's Manor gardens to a small thatched shelter in the woods, known as "the foresters' hut," where Spruce was generally to be found at about sunset, smoking a peaceful pipe, alone and well out of his wife's way.

Meanwhile, Maryllia Vancourt, lying wide awake on her bed in the long unused room that was to have been her mother's, experienced various chaotic sensations of mingled pleasure and pain. For the first time in her life of full womanhood she was alone,—independent,—free to come or go as she listed, with no one to gainsay her wishes, or place a check on her caprices. She had deliberately thrown off her aunt's protection; and with that action, had given up the wealth and luxury with which she had been lavishly surrounded ever since her father's death. For reasons of her own, which she considered sufficiently cogent, she had also resigned all expectations of being her aunt's heiress. She had taken her liberty, and was prepared to enjoy it. She had professed herself perfectly *contented to live* on the comparatively small patrimony *secured to her* by her father's will. It was quite enough,

she said, for a single woman,—at any rate, she would make it enough. And here she was, in her own old home, —the home of her childhood, which she was ashamed to think she had well-nigh forgotten. Since her fifteenth year she had travelled nearly all over the world; London, Paris, Vienna, New York, had each in turn been her "home" under the guidance of her wealthy perambulating American relative; and in the brilliant vortex of an over-moneyed society, she had been caught and whirled like a helpless floating straw. Mrs. "Fred" Vancourt, as her aunt was familiarly known to the press paragraphist, had spared no pains to secure for her a grand marriage,—and every possible advantage that could lead to that one culminating point, had been offered to her. She had been taught everything that could possibly add to her natural gifts of intelligence; she had been dressed exquisitely, taken about everywhere, and "shown off" to all the impecunious noblemen of Europe;—she had been flattered, praised, admired, petted and generally spoilt, and had been proposed to by "eligible" gentlemen with every recurring season,—but all in vain. She had taken a singular notion into her head —an idea which her matter-of-fact aunt told her was supremely ridiculous. She wanted to be loved.

"Any man can ask a girl to marry him, if he has pluck and impudence!" she said. "Especially if the girl has money, or expectations of money, and is not downright deformed, repulsive, and ill-bred. But proposals of marriage don't always mean love. I don't care a bit about being married,—but I *do* want to be loved—really loved! —I want to be 'dear to someone else' as Tennyson sings it,—not for what I *have,* but for what I *am.*"

It was this curious, old-fashioned notion of wanting to be loved that had estranged Maryllia from her wealthy

American protectress. It had developed from mere fireside argument and occasional dissension, into downright feud, and its present result was self-evident. Maryllia had broken her social fetters, and had returned to her own rightful home in a state which, for her, considered by her past experience, was one of genteel poverty, but which was also one of glorious independence. And as she restfully reclined under the old rose silk hangings which were to have encanopied that perished beauty from which she derived her own fairness, she was conscious of a novel and soothing sense of calm. The rush and hurry and frivolity of society seemed put away and done with; through her open window she could hear the rustling of leaves and the singing of birds;—the room in which she found herself pleased her taste as well as her sentiment,—and though the faintest shadow of vague wonder crossed her mind as to what she would do with her time, now that she had gained her own way and was actually all alone in the heart of the country, she did not permit such a thought to trouble her peace. The grave tranquillity of the old house was already beginning to exert its influence on her always quick and perceptive mind,—the dear remembrance of her father whom she had idolised, and whose sudden death had been the one awful shock of her life, came back to her now with a fresh and tender pathos. Little incidents of her childhood and of its affection, such as she thought she had forgotten, presented themselves one by one in the faithful recording cells of her brain,—and the more or less feverish and hurried life she had been compelled to lead under her aunt's command and chaperonage, began to efface itself slowly, like a receding coast-line from a *departing vessel.*

"It is home!" she said, "And I have not been in a

home for years! Aunt Emily's houses were never 'home.' And this is *my* home—my very own; the home of our family for generations. I ought to be proud of it, and I *will* be proud of it! Even Aunt Emily used to say that Abbot's Manor was a standing proof of the stuck-up pride of the Vancourts. I'm sure I shall find plenty to do here. I can farm my own lands and live on the profits—if there are any!"

She laughed a little, and rising from the bed went to the window and leaned out. A large white clematis pushed its moonlike blossom up to her face, as though asking to be kissed, and a bright red butterfly danced dreamily up and down in the late sunbeams, now poising on the ivy and anon darting off again into the mild still air.

"It's perfectly lovely!" said Maryllia, with a little sigh of content. "And it is all my own!"

She drew her head in from the window and turned to her mirror.

"I'm getting old," she said, surveying herself critically, and with considerable disfavour. "It's all the result of society 'pressure,' as they call it. There's a line here—and another there"—indicating the imaginary facial defects with a small tapering forefinger—"And I daresay I have some grey hairs, if I could only find them." Here she untwisted the coil at the back of her head and let it fall in a soft curling shower round her shoulders—"Oh, yes! —I daresay!" she went on, addressing her image in the glass. "You think it looks very pretty—but that is only an 'effect,' you know! It's like the advertisements the photographers do for the hairdressers: 'Hair-positively-forced-to-grow-in-six-weeks' sort of thing. Oh, what a dear old chime!" This, as she heard the ancient clock in the square turret which overlooked the Tudor courtyard give forth a

mellow tintinabulation. "What time is it, I wonder?" She glanced at the tiny trifle of a watch she had taken off and placed on her dressing-table. "Quarter past seven! I must have had a doze, after all. I think I will ring for Nancy Pyrle"—and she suited the action to the word; "I have not the least idea where my clothes are."

Nancy obeyed the summons with alacrity. She could not help a slight start as she saw her mistress, looking like "the picture of an angel" as she afterwards described it, in her loose white dressing-gown, with all her hair untwisted and floating over her shoulders. She had never seen any human creature quite so lovely.

"Do you know where my dresses are, Nancy?" enquired Maryllia.

"Yes, Miss. Mrs. Spruce unpacked everything herself, and the dresses are all hanging in this wardrobe." Here Nancy went to the piece of furniture in question. "Which one shall I give you, Miss?"

Maryllia came to her side, and looked scrutinisingly at all the graceful Parisian and Viennese flimsies that hung in an orderly row within the wardrobe, uncertain which to take. At last she settled on an exceedingly simple white tea-gown, shaped after a Greek model, and wholly untrimmed, save for a small square gold band at the throat.

"This will do!" she decided. "Nobody's coming to dine;—I shall be all alone——"

The thought struck her as quaint and strange. Nobody coming to dinner! How very odd! At Aunt Emily's there was always someone, or several someones, to dinner. To-night, she would dine all alone. Well! It would be a novel experience!

"*Are there* any nice people living about here?" she asked Nancy, as that anxious young woman carefully

divested her of her elegant dressing-gown. "People I should like to know?"

"Oh, I don't think so, Miss," replied Nancy, quite frankly, watching in wonder the dexterity and grace with which her mistress swept up all her hair into one rich twist and knotted it with two big tortoiseshell hairpins at the back of her head. "There's Sir Morton Pippitt at Badsworth Hall, three miles from here——"

Maryllia laughed gaily.

"Sir Morton Pippitt! What a funny name! Who is he?"

"Well, Miss, they do say he makes his money at bone-melting; but he's awful proud for all that—awful proud he is——"

"Well, I should think so!" said Maryllia, with much solemnity. "Bone-melting is a great business! Does he melt human bones, Nancy?"

"Oh, lor, Miss, no!" And Nancy laughed, despite herself. "Not that I've ever heard on—it's bones of animals he melts and turns into buttons and such-like."

"Man is an animal, Nancy," said Maryllia, sententiously, giving one or two little artistic touches to the loose waves of hair on her forehead. "Why should not *his* bones be turned into buttons? Why should *he* not be made useful? You may depend upon it, Nancy, human bones go into Sir Morton What's-his-name's stock-pot. I shouldn't wonder if he had left his own bones to his business in his will!

> "'Imperial Cæsar dead and turned to clay,
> May stop a hole to keep the wind away!'

That's so, Nancy! And is the gentleman who boils bones the only man about here one could ask to dinner?"

Nancy reflected.

"There's the Passon—" she began.

"Oh dear me!" exclaimed Maryllia, with a little s of impatience. "Worse than the bone-boiler!—a thou times worse! There! That will do, Nancy! I'll about till dinner's ready."

She left the room and descended the stairs, foll by the faithful Plato, and was soon to be seen by va retainers of the curious and excited household, wa slowly up and down on the grass terrace in her flo white draperies, the afterglow of the sinking sun sh on her gold-brown hair, and touching up little rec ripples in it,—such ripples as were painted by the of Charles the Second's day when he brushed into c and canvas the portrait of Mary Elia Adelgisa de Va court. Primmins, late butler to the irascible Sir M Pippitt, was so taken with the sight of her that he and there resolved his "temp'ry service" should be long, if he could manage to please her; and little Spruce being permitted by her mother to peep at "new lady" through the staircase window, could only a long breath and ejaculate: "Oh! Ain't she lovely!" she followed with eagerly admiring eyes the gossamer of Maryllia's white gown on the soft turf, and strained ears to catch the sound of the sweet voice which sudd broke out in a careless *chansonette:*

"Tu m'aimes, chérie?
Dites-moi!
Seulement un petit 'oui,'
Je demande à toi!
Le bonheur suprême
Vient quand on aime,
N'est-ce-pas, chérie?
'Oui'!"

"She's singin' to herself!" said the breathless Kitty, whispering to her mother. "Ain't she jest smilin' and beautiful?"

"Well, I will own," replied Mrs. Spruce, "she's as different to the lady *I* expected as cheese from chalk, which they generally says chalk from cheese, howsomever, that don't matter. But if I don't mistake, she's got a will of 'er own, for all that she's so smilin' and beautiful as you says, Kitty; and now don't *you* go runnin' away with notions that you can dress like 'er or look like 'er—for when once a gel of *your* make thinks she can imitate the fashions and the ways of a great lady, she's done for, body and soul. *You* ain't goin' to wear white gowns and trail 'em up an' down on the grass, nor 'ave big dogs a-follerin' up an' down while you sings in a furrin langwidge to yerself; no, not if you was to read all the trashy story-books in the world—so you needn't think it. For there ain't no millionaires comin' arter you, as they doos in penny novels,—nor nothink else what's dished up in newspapers; so jes' wear your cotton frocks in peace, an' don't worry me with wantin' to look like Miss Maryllia, for you never won't look like 'er if ye tried till ye was dead! Remember that, now! The Lord makes a many women,—but now and again He turns out a few chice samples which won't bear copyin'. Miss Maryllia's one of them samples, and we must take 'er 'umbly with prayer and thanksgivin' *as* sich!"

CHAPTER IX.

MARYLLIA'S first solitary dinner in the home of her ancestors passed off with tolerable success. She found *something not altogether* unpleasant in being alone after all.

Plato was always an intelligent, well-behaved and dignified companion in his canine way, and the meal was elegantly served by Primmins, who waited on his new mistress with as much respect and zeal as if she had been a queen. A sense of authority and importance began to impress itself upon her as she sat at the head of her own table in her own dining-hall, with all the Vandykes and Holbeins and Gainsboroughs gazing placidly down upon her from their gilded frames, and the flicker of many wax candles in old silver sconces glancing upon the shields, helmets, rusty pikes and crossed swords that decorated the panelling of the walls between and above the pictures.

"Fancy! No gas and no electric light! It is simply charming!" she thought. "And so becoming to one's dress and complexion! Only there's nobody to see the becomingness. But I can soon remedy that. Lots of people will come down and stay here if I only ask them. There's one thing quite certain about society folk—they will always come where they can be lodged and boarded free. They call it country visiting, but it really means shutting up their houses, dismissing their servants, and generally economising on their housekeeping bills. I've seen *such* a lot of it!"

She heaved a little sigh over these social reminiscences, and finished her repast in meditative silence. She had not been accustomed to much thinking, and to indulge in it at all for any length of time was actually a novelty. Her aunt had told her never to think, as it made the face serious, and developed lines on the forehead. And she had under this kind of tutelage, become one of a brilliant, fashionable, dress-loving crowd of women, who spend most of their lives in caring for their complexions and counting their lovers. Yet every now and again, a wave of re-

fance to such a useless sort of existence arose in her made a stormy rebellion. Surely there was something ler in life—something higher—something more useful intelligent than the ways and manners of a physically morally degenerate society?

It was a still calm evening, and the warmth of the sun day had drawn such odours from the hearts of the wers that the air was weighted with perfume when she andered out again into her garden after dinner, and oked up wistfully at the gables of the Manor set clear gainst a background of dark blue sky patterned with tars. A certain gravity oppressed her. There was, after all, something just a little eerie in the on-coming of night in this secluded woodland place where she had voluntarily chosen to dwell all alone and unprotected, rather than lend herself to her aunt's match-making schemes.

"Of course," she argued with herself, "I need not stay here if I don't like it. I can get a paid companion and go travelling,—but, oh dear, I've had so much travelling! —or I can own myself in the wrong to Aunt Emily, and marry that wretch Roxmouth,—Oh no! I *could* not! I *will* not!"

She gave an impatient little stamp with her foot, and anon surveyed the old house with affectionate eyes.

"You shall be my rescue!" she said, kissing her hand playfully to the latticed windows,—"You shall turn me into an old-fashioned lady, fond of making jams and pickles, and preserves and herbal waters! I'll put away all the idiotic intrigues and silly fooling of modern society in one of your quaint oaken cupboards, and lock them all up with little bags of lavender to disinfect them! And I will wait for someone to come and find me out and love me; *and if no one ever comes*——" Here she paused

then went on,—"If no one ever comes, why then—" and she laughed—"some man will have lost a good chance of marrying as true a girl as ever lived!—a girl who could love—ah!" And she stretched out her pretty rounded arms to the scented air. "*How* she could love if she were loved!"

The young moon here put in a shy appearance by showing a fleck of silver above the highest gable of the Manor.

> "A little diamond peak,
> No bigger than an unobservëd star,
> Or tiny point of fairy scimitar;
> Bright signal that she only stooped to tie
> Her silver sandals ere deliciously
> She bowed unto the heavens her timid head,
> Slowly she rose as though she would have fled."

"There's no doubt," said Maryllia, "that this place is romantic! And romance is what I've been searching for all my life, and have never found except in books. Not so much in modern books as in the books that were written by really poetical and imaginative people sixty or seventy years ago. Nowadays, the authors that are most praised go in for what they call 'realism,'—and their realism is very *un*real, and very nasty. For instance, this garden, —these lovely trees,—this dear old house—all these are real—but much too romantic for a modern writer. He would rather describe a dusthole and enumerate every potato paring in it! And here am I—I'm real enough—but I'm not a bad woman—I haven't got what is euphoniously called 'a past,' and I don't belong to the right-down vicious company of 'Souls.' So I should never do for a *heroine of latter*-day fiction. I'm afraid I'm abnormal. *It's dreadful to* be abnormal! One becomes a 'neurotic'

like Lombroso, and all the geniuses. But suppose the world were full of merely normal people,—people who did nothing but eat and sleep in the most perfectly healthy and regular manner,—oh, what a bore it would be! There would be no pictures, no sculpture, no poetry, no music, no anything worth living for. One *must* have a few ideas beyond food and clothing!"

The moon rose higher and shed a shower of silver over the grass, lighting up in strong relief the fair face upturned to it.

"Now the 'Souls' pretend to have ideas," continued Maryllia, still apostrophising the bland stillness. "But their ideas are low,—decidedly low,—and decidedly queer. And that Cabinet Ministers are in their set doesn't make them any the better. I could have been a 'Soul' if I had liked. I could have learnt a lot of wicked secrets from the married peer who wanted to be my 'affinity,'—only I wouldn't. I could have got all the Government 'tips,' gambled with them on the Stock Exchange, and made quite a fortune as a 'Soul.' Yet here I am,—no 'Soul,'—but only a poor little body, with something in me that asks for a higher flight than mere social intrigue. Just a bit of a higher flight, eh, Plato? What do you think about it?"

Plato the leonine, waved his plumy tail responsively and gently rubbed his great head against her arm. Resting one hand lightly on his neck, she moved towards the house and slowly ascended the graduating slopes of the grass terrace. Here she was suddenly met by Primmins.

"Beg your pardon, miss," he said, with an apologetic air, "but there's an old man from the village come up to see you—*a very old man*,—he's had to be carried in a chair, *and it's took a* couple of men nigh an hour and a

half to bring him along. He says he knew you years ago —I hardly likes to send him away——"

"Certainly not!—of course you mustn't send him away," said Maryllia, quickening her steps. "Poor old dear! Where is he?"

"In the great Hall, miss. They brought him through the courtyard and got him in there, before I had time to send them round to the back entrance."

Maryllia entered the house. There she was met by Mrs. Spruce, with uplifted hands.

"Well, it do beat me altogether, miss," she exclaimed, "as to how these silly men, my 'usband, too, one of the silliest, beggin' your parding, could bring that poor old Josey Letherbarrow up here all this way! And he not toddled beyond the church this seven or eight years! And it's all about those blessed Five Sisters they've come, though I told 'em you can't nohow be worrited and can't see no one——"

"But I can!" said Maryllia decisively; "I can see anyone who wishes to see me, and I will. Let me pass, Mrs. Spruce, please!"

Mrs. Spruce, thus abruptly checked, stood meekly aside, controlling her desire to pour forth fresh remonstrances at the unseemliness of any person or persons intruding upon the lady of the Manor at so late an hour in the evening as half-past nine o'clock. Maryllia hastened into the hall and there found an odd group awaiting her, composed of three very odd-looking personages,—much more novel and striking in their oddity than anything that could have been presented to her view in the social whirl of Paris or London. Josey Letherbarrow was the central figure, seated bolt upright in a cane armchair, through the lower part of which a strong pole had been thrust, securely nailed and

clamped, as well as tied in a somewhat impromptu fashion with clothes-line. This pole projected about two feet on either side of the chair to accommodate the bearers, namely Spruce and Bainton, who, having set their burden down, were now wiping their hot faces and perspiring brows with flagrantly coloured handkerchiefs of an extra large size. As Maryllia appeared, they abruptly desisted from this occupation and remained motionless, stricken with sudden confusion and embarrassment. Not so old Josey, for with unexpected alacrity he got out of his chair and stood upright, supporting himself on his stick, and doffing his old straw hat to the light girlish figure that approached him with the grace of kindliness and sympathy expressed in its every movement.

"There she be!" he exclaimed. "There be the little gel wot I used to know when she was a babby, God bless 'er! Jes' the same eyes and 'air and purty face of 'er! Welcome 'ome to th' owld Squire's daughter, mates! D'ye 'ear me!" And he turned a dim rolling eye of command on Spruce and Bainton—"I sez welcome 'ome! And when I sez it I 'spect it to bé said arter me by the both of ye, —welcome 'ome!"

Spruce, unable to hear a word of this exordium, smiled sheepishly,—and twirling the cap he held, put his coloured handkerchief into it and squeezed it tightly within the lining. Bainton, with the impending fate of the Five Sisters in view, judged it advisable not to irritate or disobey the old gentleman whom he had brought forward as special pleader in the case, and gathering his wits together he spoke out bravely.

"Welcome 'ome, it is, Josey!" he said. "We both sez it, and we both *means it!* And we 'opes the young lady *will not take it amiss* as 'ow we've come to see 'er on the

first night of 'er return, and wish 'er 'appy in the old 'ouse and long may she remain in it!"

Here he broke off, his eloquence being greatly disturbed by the gracious smile Maryllia gave him.

"Thank you so much!" she murmured, sweetly; and then going up to Josey Letherbarrow, she patted the brown wrinkled hand that grasped the stick. "How kind and good of you to come and see me! And so you knew me when I was a little girl? I hope I was nice to you! Was I?"

Josey waved his straw hat speechlessly. His first burst of enthusiasm over, he was somewhat dazed, and a little uncertain as to how he should next proceed with his mission.

"Tell 'er as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked;" growled Bainton in an undertone.

But Josey's mind had gone wandering far afield, groping amid memories of the past, and his aged eyes were fixed on Maryllia with a strange look of wonder and remembrance commingled.

"Th' owld Squire! Th' owld Squire!" he muttered; "I see 'im now—as broad an' tall and well-set up a gentleman as ever lived—and sez he: 'Josey, that little white thing is all I've got left of the wife I was bringin' 'ome to be the sunshine of the old Manor.' Aye, he said that! 'Its eyes are like those of my Dearest!' Aye, he said that, too! The little white thing! She's 'ere,—and th' owld Squire's gone!"

The pathos of his voice struck Maryllia to the heart,—and for the moment she could not keep back a few tears that gathered, despite herself, and glistened on her long lashes. Furtively she dashed them away, but not before Bainton had seen them.

"Well, arter all, Josey's nothin' but a meanderin' old

idgit!" he thought angrily. "'Ere 'ave I been an' took 'im for a wise man wot would know exackly 'ow to begin and ask for the sparin' of the old trees, and if he ain't gone on the wrong tack altogether and made the poor little lady cry! I think I'll do a bit of this business myself while I've got the chance—for if I don't, ten to one he'll be tellin' the story of the wopses' nest next, and a fine on-common show we'll make of ourselves 'ere with our manners." And he coughed loudly—"Ahem! Josey, will you tell Miss Vancourt about the Five Sisters, or shall I?"

Maryllia glanced from one to the other in bewilderment.

"The Five Sisters!" she echoed. "Who are they?"

Here Spruce imagined, as he often did, that he had been asked a question.

"Such were our orders from Mr. Leach," he said, in his quiet equable voice. "We's to be there to-morrow marnin' quarter afore six with ropes and axes."

"Ropes and axes shall not avail against the finger of the Lord, or the wrath of the Almighty!" said Josey Letherbarrow, suddenly coming out of his abstraction. "And if th' owld Squire were alive he wouldn't have had 'em touched—no, not he! He'd ha' starved sooner! And if the Five Sisters are laid low, the luck of the Manor will lay low with 'em! But it's not too late—not too late!" —and he turned his face, now alive in its every feature with strong emotion, to Maryllia—"Not too late if the Squire's little gel is still her father's pride and glory! And that's what I've come for to the Manor this night,—I ain't been inside the old 'ouse for this ten 'ear or more, but they's brought me,—me—old Josey,—stiff as I am, and failin' as I am, to see ye, my dear little gel, and ask ye for God's *love to save* the old trees wot 'as waved in the *woodland free and wild* for 'undreds o' years, and wot

deserves more gratitude from Abbot's Manor than killin' for long sarvice!"

He began to tremble with nervous excitement, and Maryllia put her hand soothingly on his arm.

"You must sit down, Josey," she said. "You will be so tired standing! Sit down and tell me all about it! What trees are you speaking of? And who is going to cut them down? You see I don't know anything about the place yet,—I've only just arrived—but if they are *my* trees, and you say my father would not have wished them to be cut down, they *shan't* be cut down!—be sure of that!"

Josey's eyes sparkled, and he waved his battered hat triumphantly.

"Didn't I tell ye?" he exclaimed, turning round upon Bainton. "Didn't I say as 'ow this was the way to do it? —and as 'ow the little gel wot I knew as a babby would listen to me when she wouldn't listen to no one else? An' as 'ow the Five Sisters would be spared? An' worn't I right? Worn't I true?"

Maryllia smiled.

"You really *must* sit down!" she said again, gently persuading him into his chair, wherein he sank heavily, like a stone, though his face shone with alertness and vigour. "Primmins!" and she addressed that functionary who had been standing in the background watching the little scene. "Bring some glasses of port wine." Primmins vanished to execute this order. "Now, you dear old man," continued Maryllia, drawing up an oaken settle close to Josey's knee and seating herself with a confidential air; "you must tell me just what you want me to do, and I will do it!"

She looked a mere child, with her fair face upturned *and her rippling* hair falling loosely away from her brows

A great tenderness softened Josey's eyes as he fixed them upon her.

"God Almighty bless ye!" he said, raising his trembling hand above her head; "God bless ye in your uprisin' and downlyin',—and make the old 'ouse and the old ways sweet to ye! For there's naught like 'ome in a wild wandering world—and naught like love to make 'appiness out of sorrow! God bless ye, dear litle gel!—and give ye all your 'art's desire, if so be it's for your good and guidin'!"

Instinctively, Maryllia bent her head with a pretty reverence under the benediction of so venerable a personage, and gently pressed the wrinkled hand as it slowly dropped again. Then glancing at Bainton, she said softly:

"He's very tired, I'm afraid!—perhaps too tired to tell me all he wishes to say. Will you explain what it is he wants?"

Bainton, thus adjured, took courage.

"Thank ye kindly, miss; and if I may make so bold, it's not what he wants more'n wot all the village wants and wot we've been 'opin' against 'ope for, trustin' to the chance of your comin' 'ome to do it for us. Passon Walden he's a rare good man, and he's done all he can, and he's been and seen Oliver Leach, but it ain't all no use,——"

He paused, as Maryllia interrupted him by a gesture.

"Oliver Leach?" she queried. "He is my agent here, I believe?"

"Jes' so, miss—he was put in as agent arter the Squire's death, and he's been 'ere ever since, bad luck to 'im! And he's been a-cuttin' down timber on the place whenever he's took a mind to, askin' no by-your-leaves, and none of us 'adn't no right to say a wurrd, he bein' master-like—*but when it* comes to the Five Sisters—why *then we sez, if the Five* Sisters lay low there's an end of

the pride and prosperity of the village, an' Passon Walden he be main worrited about it, for he do love trees like as they were his own brothers, m'appen more'n brothers, for sometimes there's no love lost twixt the likes o' they, and beggin' your pardon, miss, he sent me to ye with a message from hisself 'fore dinner, but you was a-lyin' down and couldn't be disturbed nohow, so I goes down to Spruce"—here Bainton indicated the silent Spruce with a jerk of his thumb—"he be the forester 'ere, under Mr. Leach's orders, as deaf as a post unless you 'ollers at him, but a good-meanin' man for all that—and I sez, 'Spruce, you and me 'ull go an' fetch old Josey Letherbarrow, and see if bein' the oldest 'n'abitant, as they sez in books, he can't get a wurrd with Miss Vancourt, and so 'ere we be, miss, for the trees be chalked"—and he turned abruptly to Spruce and bellowed—"Baint the trees chalked for comin' down to-morrow marnin'? Speak fair!"

Spruce heard, and at once gave a lucid statement.

"By Mr. Leach's orders, miss," he said, addressing Maryllia; "the five old beech-trees on the knoll, which the village folk call the 'Five Sisters' are to be felled to-morrow marnin'. They've stood, so I'm told, an' so I b'lieve, two or three hundred years——"

"And they're going to be cut down!" exclaimed Maryllia. "I never heard of such wickedness! How disgraceful!"

Spruce saw by the movement of her lips that she was speaking, and therefore at once himself subsided into silence. Bainton again took up the parable.

"He's nigh stone-deaf, miss, so you'll 'scuse him if he don't open his mouth no more till we shouts at him—but *what he sez* is true enough. At six o'clock to-morrow *marnin'*——"

Here Primmins entered with the port wine.

"Primmins, where does the agent, Leach, live?" enquired Maryllia.

"I really couldn't say, miss. I'll ask——"

"'Tain't no use askin'," said Bainton. "He lives a mile out of the village; but he ain't at 'ome nohow this evenin', bein' gone to Riversford town for a bit o' gamblin' at cards. Lor, miss, beggin' yer pardon, gamblin' with the cards do get rid o' timber—it do reely now!"

Maryllia took a glass of port wine from the tray which Primmins handed to her, and gave it herself to old Josey. Her mind had entirely grasped the situation, despite the prolix nature of Bainton's discourse. A group of historic old trees were to be felled by the agent's orders at six o'clock the next morning unless she prevented it. That was the sum total of the argument. And here was something for her to do, and she resolved to do it.

"Now, Josey," she said with a smile, "you must drink a glass of wine to my health. And you also—and you!" and she nodded encouragingly to Spruce and Bainton. "And be quite satisfied about the trees—they shall not be touched."

"God bless ye!" said Josey, drinking off his wine at a gulp. "And long life t'ye and 'appiness to enjoy it!"

Bainton, with a connoisseur's due appreciation of a good old brand, sipped at his glass slowly, while Spruce, hastily swallowing his measure of the cordial, wiped his mouth furtively with the back of his hand, murmuring: 'Your good 'elth, an' many of 'em!"

"Wishin' ye long days o' peace an' plenty," said Bainton, between his appreciative sips. "But as fur as the trees is consarned, you'll 'scuse me, miss, for sayin' it, but the time bein' short, I don't see 'ow it's goin' to be 'elped,

Oliver Leach bein' away, and no post delivered at his 'ouse till eight o'clock——"

"I will settle all that," said Maryllia—"You must leave everything to me. In the meantime,"—and she glanced at Spruce,—then appealingly turned to Bainton—"Will you try and make your friend understand an order I want to give him? Or shall I ask Mrs. Spruce to come and speak to him?"

"Lord love ye, he'll be sharper to hear me than his wife, miss, beggin' yer pardon," said Bainton, with entire frankness. "He's too accustomed to her jawin' an' wouldn't get a clear impression like. Spruce!" And he uplifted his voice in a roar that made the old rafters of the hall ring. "Get ready to take Miss Vancourt's orders, will ye?"

Spruce was instantly on the alert, and put his hand to his ear.

"Tell him, please," said Maryllia, still addressing Bainton, "that he is to meet the agent as arranged at the appointed place to-morrow morning; but that he is not to take any ropes or axes or any men with him. He is simply to say that by Miss Vancourt's orders the trees are not to be touched."

These words Bainton dutifully bellowed into Spruce's semiclosed organs of hearing. A look first of astonishment and then of fear came over the simple fellow's face.

"I'm afraid,"—he at last faltered, "that the lady does not know what a hard man Mr. Leach is; he'll as good as kill me if I go there alone to him!"

"Lord love ye, man, you won't be alone!" roared Bainton,—"There's plenty in the village 'ull take care o' that!"

"Say to him," continued Maryllia steadily, noting the forester's troubled countenance, "he must now remember

that I am mistress here, and that my orders, even if given at the last moment, are to be obeyed."

"That's it!" chuckled Josey Letherbarrow, knocking his stick on the ground in a kind of ecstasy,—"That's it! Things ain't goin' to be as they 'as been now the Squire's little gel is 'ome! That's it!" And he nodded emphatically. "Give a reskil rope enough an' he'll 'ang hisself by the neck till he be dead, and the Lord ha' mercy on his soul!"

Maryllia smiled, watching all her three quaint visitors with a sensation of mingled interest and whimsical amusement.

"D'ye hear? You're to tell Leach," shouted Bainton, "that Miss Vancourt is mistress 'ere, and her orders is to be obeyed at the last moment! Which you might ha' understood without splittin' my throat to tell ye, if ye had a little more sense, which, lackin' 'owever, can't be 'elped. What are ye afeard of, eh?"

"Mr. Leach is a hard man," continued Spruce, anxiously glancing at Maryllia; "he would lose me my place if he could——"

Maryllia heard, and privately decided that the person to lose his place would be Leach himself. "It is quite exciting!" she thought; "I was wondering a while ago what I should do to amuse myself in the country, and here I am called upon at once to remedy wrong and settle village feuds! Nothing could be more novel and delightful!" Aloud, she said,—

"None of the people who were in my father's service will lose their places with me, unless for some very serious fault. Please"—and she raised her eyes in pretty appeal to Bainton—"Please make everybody understand that. *Are you one of the foresters* here?"

Bainton shook his head.

"No, miss,—I'm the Passon's head man. I doos all his gardening and keeps a few flowers growin' in the churchyard. There's a rose climbin' over the cross on the old Squire's grave what will do ye good to see, come another fortnight of this warm weather. But Passon, he be main worrited about the Five Sisters, and knowin' as 'ow I'd worked for the old Squire at 'arvest an' sich-like, he thought I might be able to 'splain to ye——"

"I see!" said Maryllia, thoughtfully, surveying with renewed interest the old-world figure of Josey Letherbarrow in his clean smock-frock. "Now, how are you going to get Josey home again?" And a smile irradiated her face. "Will you carry him along just as you brought him?"

"Why, yes, miss—it'll be all goin' downhill now, and there's a moon, and it'll be easy work. And if so be we're sure the Five Sisters 'ull be saved——"

"You may be perfectly certain of it," said Maryllia interrupting him with a little gesture of decision—"Only you must impress well on Mr. Spruce here, that my orders are to be obeyed."

"Beggin' yer pardon, miss—what Spruce is afeard of is that Leach may tell him he's a liar, and may jest refuse to obey. That's quite on the cards, miss—it is reely now!"

"Oh, is it, indeed!" and Maryllia's eyes flashed with a sudden fire that made them look brighter and deeper than ever and revealed a depth of hidden character not lacking in self-will,—"Well, we shall see! At any rate, I have given my orders, and I expect them to be carried out! You understand?"

"I do, miss;"—and Bainton touched his forelock re-

spectfully. "An' while we're joggin' easy downhill with Josey, I'll get it well rubbed into Spruce. And, by yer leave, if you hain't no objection, I'll tell Passon Walden that sich is your orders, and m'appen he'll find a way of impressin' Leach straighter than we can."

Maryllia was not particularly disposed to have the village parson brought into her affairs, but she waived the query lightly aside.

"You can do as you like about that," she said carelessly. "As the parson is your master, you can of course tell him if you think he will be interested. But I really don't see why he should be asked to interfere. My orders are sufficient."

A very decided ring of authority in the clear voice warned Bainton that here was a lady who was not to be trifled with, or to be told this or that, or to be put off from her intentions by any influence whatsoever. He could not very well offer a reply, so he merely touched his forelock again and was discreetly silent. Maryllia then turned playfully to Josey Letherbarrow.

"Now are you quite happy?" she asked. "Quite easy in your mind about the trees?"

"Thanks be to the Lord and you, God bless ye!" said Josey, piously; "I'm sartin sure the Five Sisters 'ull wave their leaves in the blessed wind long arter I'm laid under the turf and the daisies! I'll sleep easy this night for knowin' it, and thank ye kindly and all blessin' be with ye! And if I never sees ye no more——"

"Now, Josey, don't talk nonsense!" said Maryllia, with a pretty little air of protective remonstrance. "Such a clever old person as you are ought to know better than to be morbid! 'Never see me no more' indeed! Why I'm *coming to see you* soon,—very soon!—I shall find

out where you live, and I shall pay you a visit and have *such* a long talk with you! I'm a dreadful talker! You shall tell me all about the village and the people in it, and I'm sure I shall learn more from you in an hour than if I studied the place by myself for a week! Shan't I?"

Josey was decidedly flattered. The port wine had reddened his nose and had given an extra twinkle to his eyes.

"Well, I ain't goin' to deny but what I knows a thing or two—" he began, with a sly glance at her.

"Of course you do! Heaps of things! I shall coax them all out of you! You will tell me all the exciting news of the place. And now, good night!—No!—don't get up!" for Josey was making herculean efforts to rise from his chair again. "Just stay where vou are, and let them carry you carefully home. Good night!"

She gave a little salute which included all three of her rustic visitors, and moved away. Passing under the heavily-carved arched beams of oak which divided the hall from the rest of the house, she turned her head backward over her shoulder with a smile.

"Good night, Ambassador Josey!"

Josey waved his old hat energetically.

"Good night, my beauty! Good night to Squire's gel! Good night——"

But before he could pile on any more epithets, she was gone, and the butler Primmins stood in her place.

"I'll help give you a lift down to the gates," he said, surveying Josey with considerable interest. "You're a game old chap for your age!"

Josey was still waving his hat to the dark embrasure through which Maryllia's white figure had vanished.

"*Ain't she a* beauty? ain't she jest a real Vancouv

pride?" he demanded excitedly. "Lord! We won't know ourselves in a month or two! You marrk my wurrds, boys! See if what I say don't come true! Leach may cheat the gallus, but he won't cheat them blue eyes, let him try ever so! They'll be the Lord's arrows in his skin! You see if they ain't!"

Bainton here gave a signal to Spruce, and they hoisted up the improvised carrying-chair between them, Primmins steadying it behind.

"There ain't goin' to be no layin' low of the Five Sisters!" Josey continued with increasing shrillness and excitement as he was borne out into the moonlit court-yard. "And there ain't goin' to be no devil's work round the old Manor no more! Welcome 'ome to Squire's gel! Welcome 'ome!"

"Shut up, Josey!" said Bainton, though kindly enough —"You'll soon part with all the breath you've got in yer body if ye makes a screech owl of yerself like that in the night air! You's done enough for once in a way,—keep easy an' quiet while we carries ye back to the village—ye weighs a hundred pound 'eavier if ye're noisy,—ye do reely now!"

Thus adjured, Josey subsided into silence, and what with the joy he felt at the success of his embassy, the warm still air, and the soothing influence of the moon-light, he soon fell fast asleep, and did not wake till he arrived at his own home in safety. Having deposited him there, and seen to his comfort, Spruce and Bainton left him to his night's rest, and held a brief colloquy out-side his cottage door.

"I'm awful 'feard goin' to-morrow marnin' up to the Five Sisters with ne'er a tool and ne'er a man,—Leach 'ull be that wild!" said Spruce, his rubicund face paling

at the very thought—"If I could but 'ave 'ad written instructions, like!"

"Why didn't you ask for 'em while you 'ad the chance?" demanded Bainton testily. "It's too late now to bother your mind with what ye might ha' done if ye'd had a bit of gumption. And it's too late for me to be goin' and speakin' to Passon Walden. There's nothin' to be done now till the marnin'!"

"Nothin' to be done till the marnin'," echoed Spruce with a sigh, catching these words by happy chance. "All the same, she's a fine young lady, and 'er orders is to be obeyed. She ain't a bit like what I expected her to be."

"Nor she ain't what I bet she would be," said Bainton, heedless as to whether his companion heard him or not; "I've lost 'arf a crown to my old 'ooman, for I sez, sez I, 'She's bound to be a 'igh an' mighty stuck-up sort o' miss wot won't never 'ave a wurrd for the likes of we,' an' my old 'ooman she sez to me: 'Go 'long with ye for a great silly gawk as ye are; I'll bet ye 'arf a crown she won't be!' So I sez 'Done,'—an' done it is. For she's just as sweet as clover in the spring, an' seems as gentle as a lamb,—though I reckon she's got a will of 'er own and a mind to do what she likes, when and 'ow she likes. I'll 'ave a fine bit o' talk with Passon 'bout her as soon as iver he gives me the chance."

"Aye, good night it is," observed Spruce, placidly taking all these remarks as evening adieux,—"Yon moon's got 'igh, and it's time for bed if so be we rises early. Easy rest ye!"

Bainton nodded. It was all the response necessary. The two then separated, going their different ways to their *different homes*, Spruce having to get back to the Manor *and a possible* curtain-lecture from his wife. All the

village was soon asleep,—and eleven o'clock rang from the church-tower over closed cottages in which not a flicker of lamp or candle was to be seen. The moon-beams shed a silver rain upon the outlines of the neatly thatched roofs and barns—illumining with touches of radiance as from heaven, the beautiful "God's House" which dominated the whole cluster of humble habitations. Everything was very quiet,—the little hive of humanity had ceased buzzing; and the intense stillness was only broken by the occasional murmur of a ripple breaking from the river against the pebbly shore.

Up at the Manor, however, the lights were not yet extinguished. Maryllia, on the departure of "Ambassador Josey" as she had called him, and his two convoys, had sent for Mrs. Spruce and had gone very closely with her into certain matters connected with Mr. Oliver Leach. It had been difficult work,—for Mrs. Spruce's garrulity, combined with her habit of wandering from the immediate point of discussion, and her anxiety to avoid involving herself or her husband in trouble, had created a chaotic confusion in her mind, which somewhat interfered with the lucidity of her statements. Little by little, however, Maryllia extracted a sufficient number of facts from her hesitating and reluctant evidence to gain considerable information on many points respecting the management of her estate, and she began to feel that her return home was providential and had been in a manner pre-ordained. She learned all that Mrs. Spruce could tell her respecting the famous "Five Sisters;" how they were the grandest and most venerable trees in all the country round—and how they stood all together on a grassy eminence about a mile and a half *from the Manor*-house and on the Manor lands *just beyond the more low-lying* woods that spread between

Whereupon Maryllia decided that she would take an early ride over her property the next day,—and gave orders that her favourite mare, "Cleopatra," ready saddled and bridled, should be brought round to the door at five o'clock the next morning. This being settled, and Mrs. Spruce having also humbly stated that all the peacock's feathers she could find had been summarily cast forth from the Manor through the medium of the parcels' post, Maryllia bade her a kindly good night.

"To-morrow," she said, "we will go all over the house together, and you will explain everything to me. But the first thing to be done is to save those old trees."

"Well, no one wouldn't 'ave saved 'em if so be as you 'adn't come 'ome, miss," declared Mrs. Spruce. "For Mr. Leach he be a man of his word, and as obs'nate as they makes 'em, which the Lord Almighty knows men is all made as obs'nate as pigs—and he's been master over the place like——"

"More's the pity!" said Maryllia. "But he is master here no longer, Spruce; I am now both mistress and master. Remember that, please!"

Mrs. Spruce curtseyed dutifully and withdrew. The close cross-examination she had undergone respecting Leach had convinced her of two things,—firstly, that her new mistress, though such a childlike-looking creature, was no fool,—and secondly, that though she was perfectly gentle, kind, and even affectionate in her manner, she evidently had a will of her own, which it seemed likely she would enforce, if necessary, with considerable vigour and imperativeness. And so the worthy old housekeeper decided that on the whole it would be well to be careful,—to mind one's P's and Q's as it were,—to pause before rushing

pell-mell into a flood of unpremeditated speech, and to pay the strictest possible attention to her regular duties.

"Then m'appen we'll stay on in the old place," she considered. "But if we doos those things which we ought not have done, as they sez in the prayer-book, we'll get the sack in no time, for all that she looks so smilin' and girlie-like."

And so profound were her cogitations on this point that she actually forgot to give her husband the sound rating she had prepared for him concerning the part he had taken in bringing Josey Letherbarrow up to the Manor. Returning from the village in some trepidation, that harmless man was allowed to go to bed and sleep in peace, with no more than a reminder shrilled into his ears to be "up with the dawn, as Miss Maryllia would be about early."

Maryllia herself, meanwhile, quite unconscious that her small personality had made any marked or tremendous effect upon her domestics, retired to rest in happy mood. She was glad to be in her own home, and still more glad to find herself needed there.

"I've been an absolutely useless creature up till now," she said, shaking down her hair, after the maid Nancy had disrobed her and left her for the night. "The fact is, there never was a more utterly idle and nonsensical creature in the world than I am! I've done nothing but dress and curl my hair, and polish my face, and dance, and flirt and frivol the time away. Now, if I only am able to save five historical old trees, I shall have done *something* useful;—something more than half the women I know would ever take the trouble to do. For, of course, I suppose I shall have a row,—or as Aunt Emily would say 'words,'—*with the agent.* All the better! I love a *fight,—especially with a man* who thinks himself wiser than

I am! That is where men are so ridiculous,—they always think themselves wiser than women, even though some of them can't earn their own living except through a woman's means. Lots of men will take a woman's money, and sneer at her while spending it! I know them!" And she nestled into her bed, with a little cosy cuddling movement of her soft white shoulders—"'Take all and give nothing!' is the motto of modern manhood;—I don't admire it,—I don't endorse it; I never shall. The true motto of love and chivalry should be—'Give all—take nothing!'"

Midnight chimed from the courtyard turret. She listened to the mellow clang with a sense of pleased comfort and security.

"Many people would think of ghosts and all sorts of uncanny things in an old, old house like this at midnight;" she thought. "But somehow I don't believe there are any ghosts here. At any rate, not unpleasant ones;—only dear and loving 'home' ghosts, who will do me no harm!"

She soon sank into a restful slumber, and the moonlight poured in through the old latticed windows, forming a delicate tracery of silver across the faded rose silken coverlet of the bed, and showing the fair face, half in light, half in shade, that rested against the pillow, with the unbound hair scattered loosely on either side of it, like a white lily between two leaves of gold. And as the hours wore on, and the silence grew more intense, the slow and somewhat rusty pendulum of the clock in the tower could just be heard faintly ticking its way on towards the figures of the dawn. "Give all—take nothing—Give —all—take—no—thing!" it seemed to say;—the motto of love and the code of chivalry, according to Maryllia.

CHAPTER X.

A THIN silver-grey mist floating delicately above the river Rest and dispersing itself in light wreaths across the flowering banks and fields, announced the breaking of the dawn,—and John Walden, who had passed a restless night, threw open his bedroom window widely, with a sense of relief that at last the time had come again for movement and action. His blood was warm and tingling with suppressed excitement,—he was ready for a fight, and felt disposed to enjoy it. His message to Miss Vancourt had apparently failed,—for on the previous evening Bainton had sent round word to say that he had been unable to see the lady before dinner, but that he was going to try again later on. No result of this second attempt had been forthcoming, so Walden concluded that his gardener had received a possibly curt and complete rebuff from the new "Squiress," and had been too much disheartened by his failure to come and report it.

"Never mind!—we'll have a tussle for the trees!" said John to himself, as after his cold tubbing he swung his dumb-bells to and fro with the athletic lightness and grace of long practice. "If the villagers are prepared to contest Leach's right to destroy the Five Sisters, I'll back them up in it! I will! And I'll speak my mind to Miss Vancourt too! She is no doubt as apathetic and indifferent to sentiment as all her 'set,' but if I can prick her through her pachydermatous society skin, I'll do it!"

Having got himself into a great heat and glow with this mental resolve and his physical exertions combined, he hastily donned his clothes, took his stoutest walking-stick, and sallied forth into the cool dim air of the as

yet undeclared morning, the faithful Nebbie accompanying him. Scarcely, however, had he shut his garden gate behind him when Bainton confronted him.

"Marnin', Passon!"

"Oh, there you are!" said Walden. "Well, now what's going to be done?"

"Nothin's goin' to be done," rejoined Bainton stolidly, with his usual inscrutable smile; "unless m'appen Spruce is 'avin' every bone broke in his body 'fore we gets there. Ye see, he ain't got no written orders like,—and mebbe Leach 'ull tell him he's a liar and that Miss Vancourt's instructions is all my eye!"

"Miss Vancourt's instructions?" echoed Walden. "Has she given any?"

"Of course she has!" replied Bainton, triumphantly. "Which is that the trees is not to be touched on no account. And she's told Spruce, through me,—which I bellowed it all into his ear,—to go and meet Leach this marnin' up by the Five Sisters and give him 'er message straight from the shoulder!"

Walden's face cleared and brightened visibly.

"I'm glad—I'm very glad!" he said. "I hardly thought she could sanction such an outrage——but, tell me, how did you manage to give her my message?"

"'Tworn't your message at all, Passon, don't you think it!" said Bainton. "You ain't got so fur as that. She's not the sort o' lady to take a message from no one whether passon, pope or emp'rur. Not she! It was old Josey Letherbarrow as done it." And he related the incidents of the past evening in a style peculiar to himself, *laying consid*erable weight on his own remarkable intelli*gence and* foresight in having secured the 'oldest 'n'abi-

tant' of the village to act as representative and ambassador for the majority.

Walden listened with keen interest.

"Yes,—Leach is likely to be quarrelsome," he said, at its conclusion. "There's no doubt about that. We mustn't leave Spruce to bear the brunt of his black rage all alone. Come along, Bainton!—I will enforce Miss Vancourt's orders myself if necessary."

This was just what Bainton wanted,—and master and man started off at a swinging pace for the scene of action, Bainton pouring forth as he went a glowing description of the wonderful and unexpected charm of the new mistress of the Manor.

"There ain't been nothin' like her in our neighbourhood iver at all, so fur as I can remember," he declared. "A' coorse I must ha' seed her when I worked for th' owld Squire at whiles, but she was a child then, an' I ain't a good hand at rememberin' like Josey be, besides I never takes much 'count of childern runnin' round. But 'ere was we all a-thinkin' she'd be a 'igh an' mighty fashion-plate, and she ain't nothin' of the sort, onny jest like a little sugar-figure on a weddin'-cake wot looks sweet at ye and smiles pleasant,—though she's got a flash in them eyes of hers which minds me of a pony wot ain't altogether broke in. Josey, he sez them eyes is a-goin' to finish up Leach,—which mebbe they will and mebbe they won't;—all the same they's eyes you won't see twice in a lifetime! Lord love ye, Passon, ain't it strange 'ow the Almighty puts eyes in the 'eads of women wot ain't a bit like wot he puts in the 'eads of men. We gets the sight all right, but somehow we misses the beauty. An' there's plenty of women wot has eyes correct in stock and colour, as we sez of the flowers,—but they're like prison

berries, shinin' an' black an' false-like,—an' if ye touch 'em ye're a dead man. Howsomever when ye sees eyes like them that was smilin' at old Josey last night, why it's jest a wonderful thing; and it don't make me s'prised no more at the Penny Poltry-books wot's got such a lot about blue eyes in 'em. Blue's the colour—there's no doubt about it;—there ain't no eye to beat a blue one!"

Walden heard all this disjointed talk with a certain impatience. Swinging along at a rapid stride, and glad in a sense that the old trees were to be saved, he was nevertheless conscious of annoyance,—though by whom, or at what he was annoyed, he could not have told. Plunging into the dewy woods, with all the pungent odours of moss and violets about his feet, he walked swiftly on, Bainton having some difficulty to keep up with him. The wakening birds were beginning to pipe their earliest carols; gorgeously-winged insects, shaken by the passing of human footsteps from their slumbers in the cups of flowers, soared into the air like jewels suddenly loosened from the floating robes of Aurora,—and the gentle stir of rousing life sent a pulsing wave through the long grass. Every now and again Bainton glanced up at the "Passon's" face and murmured under his breath,—"Blue's the colour—there ain't nowt to beat it!" possibly inspired thereto by the very decided blue sparkle in the eyes of the "man of God" who was marching steadily along in the "Onward Christian Soldiers" style, with his shoulders well back, his head well poised, and his whole bearing expressive of both decision and command. Out of the woods they passed into an open clearing, where the meadows, tenderly green and wet with dew, sloped upwards into small hillocks, sinking again into deep dingles, adorned with may-trees that were showing their white buds like little pellets of snow among

reen, and where numerous clusters of blackthorn
l out lovely lavish tangles of blossom as fine as
; of bleached wool or thread-lace upon its jet-like
Across these fields dotted with opening buttercups
aisies, Walden and his "head man about the place"
quick way, and climbing the highest portion of the
ground just in front of them, arrived at a wide
ı of peaceful pastoral landscape comprising a fine
›f the river in all its devious windings through fields
›astures, overhung at many corners with ancient
s, and clasping the village of St. Rest round about
th a girdle of silver and blue. Here on a slight
nce stood the venerable sentinels of the fair scene,
glorious old "Five Sister" beeches which on this
norning had been doomed to bid farewell for ever
kind sky. Noble creatures were they in their splen-
irth and broadly-stretching branches, which were
ll alive with the palest and prettiest young green,—
s Walden sprang up the thyme-scented turfy ascent
lifted them proudly above all their compeers, his
beat with mingled indignation and gladness,—in-
ion that such grand creations of a bountiful Pro-
:e should ever have been so much as threatened
annihilation by a destructive, ill-conditioned human
like Oliver Leach,—and gladness, that at the last
nt their safety was assured through the intervention
Josey Letherbarrow. For, of course Miss Vancourt
f would never have troubled about them. Walden
himself inwardly positive on that score. She could
no particular care or taste for trees, John thought.
; the pathetic pleading of Josey,—his quaint appear-
his extreme *age*—and his touching feebleness, which
all together had softened the callous heart of the

mistress of the Manor, and had persuaded her to stay the intended outrage.

"If Josey had asked her to spare a gooseberry-bush, she would probably have consented," said Walden to himself. "He is so old and frail,—she could hardly have refused his appeal without seeming to be almost inhuman."

Here his reflections were abruptly terminated by a clamour of angry voices, and hastening his steps up the knoll, he there confronted a group of rough rustic lads gathered in a defensive half-circle round Spruce who, white and breathless, was bleeding profusely from a deep cut across his forehead. Opposite him stood Oliver Leach, livid with rage, grasping a heavy dog-whip.

"You damned, deaf liar!" he shouted. "Do you think I'm going to take *your* word? How dare you disobey my orders! I'll have you kicked off the place, you and your loud-tongued wife and the whole kit of you! What d'ye mean by bringing these louts up from the village to bull-bait me, eh? What d'ye mean by it? I'll have you all locked up in Riversford jail before the day's much older! You whining cur!" And he raised his whip threateningly. "I've given you one, and I'll give you another——"

"Noa, ye woan't!" said a huge, raw-boned lad, standing out from the rest. "You woan't strike 'im no more, if ye wants a hull skin! Me an' my mates 'ull take care o' that! You go whoam, Mister Leach!—you go whoam! —you've 'eerd plain as the trees is to be left stannin'—them's the orders of the new Missis,—and you ain't no call to be swearin' yerself black in the face, 'cos you can't get yer own way for once. You're none so prutty lookin' *that we woan't* know 'ow to make ye a bit pruttier if ye *stays 'ere enny* longer!"

And he grinned suggestively, doubling up a portentous fist, and beginning to roll up his shirt sleeves slowly with an ominous air of business.

Leach looked at the group of threatening faces, and pulled from his pocket a notebook and pencil.

"I know you all, and I shall take down your names," he said, with vindictive sharpness, though his lips trembled —"You, Spruce, are under my authority, and you have deliberately disobeyed my orders——"

"And you, Leach, are under Miss Vancourt's authority and you are deliberately refusing to obey your employer's orders," said Walden, suddenly emerging from the shadow cast by one of the great trees. "And you have assaulted and wounded Spruce who brought you those orders. Shame on you, man! Riversford jail is more likely to receive *you* as a tenant than any of these lads!" Here he turned to the young men who on seeing their minister had somewhat sheepishly retreated, lifting their caps and rampling backward on each other's toes. "Go home, boys," he said peremptorily, yet kindly; "there's nothing for you to do here. Go home to your breakfasts and your work. The trees won't be touched——"

"Oh, won't they!" sneered Leach, now perfectly white with passion. "Who's going to pay me for the breaking of my contract, I should like to know? The trees are sold —they were sold as they stand a fortnight ago,—and down they come to-day, orders or no orders; I'll have my own men up here at work in less than an hour."

Walden turned upon him.

"Very well, then, I shall ask Miss Vancourt to set the police to watch her trees and take you into custody," he said, coolly. "If you have sold the trees standing, to cover *your gambling debts, you* will have to *un*sell them, that's

all. They never were yours to dispose of;—you can no more sell them than you can sell the Manor. You have no permission to make money for yourself out of other people's property. That kind of thing is common thieving, though it *may* sometimes pass for Estate Agency business!"

Leach sprang forward, his whip uplifted,—but before it could fall, with one unanimous yell, the young rustics rushed upon him and wrested it from his hand. At this moment Bainton, who had been silently binding Spruce's cut forehead with a red cotton handkerchief, so that the poor man presented the appearance of a melodramatic "stage" warrior, suddenly looked up, uttered an exclamation, and gave a warning signal.

"Better not go on wi' the hargyment jes' now, Passon!" he said,—"'Ere comes the humpire!"

Even as he spoke, the quick gallop of hoofs echoed thuddingly on the velvety turf, and the group of disputants hastily scattered to right and left, as a magnificent mare, wild-eyed and glossy-coated, dashed into their centre and came to a swift halt, drawn up in an instant by the touch of her rider on the rein. All eyes were turned to the slight woman's figure in the saddle, that sat so easily, that swayed the reins so lightly, and that seemed as it were, throned high above them in queenly superiority—a figure wholly unconventional, clad in a riding-skirt and jacket of a deep soft violet hue, and wearing no hat to shield the bright hair from the fresh wind that waved its fair ripples to and fro caressingly and tossed a shining curl loose from the carelessly twisted braid. Murmurs of "The new Missis!" "Th' owld Squire's darter!"—ran from mouth to mouth, and John Walden, seized by a sudden embarrassment, withdrew as far as possible into the shadow of

the trees in a kind of nervous hope to escape from the young lady's decidedly haughty glance, which swept like a flash of light, round the assembled group and settled at last with chill scrutiny on the livid and breathless Oliver Leach.

"You are the agent here, I presume?"

Maryllia's voice rang cold and clear,—there was not a trace of the sweet and coaxing tone in it that had warmed the heart of old Josey Letherbarrow.

Leach looked up, lifting his cap half reluctantly.

"I am."

"You have had my orders?"

Leach was silent. The young rustics hustled one another forward, moved by strong excitement, all eager to see the feminine "Humpire" who had descended upon them as suddenly as a vision falling from the skies, and all wondering what would happen next.

"You have had my orders?" repeated Maryllia;—then, as no answer was vouchsafed to her, she looked round and perceived Bainton. To him she at once addressed herself.

"Who has struck Spruce?"

Bainton hesitated. It was an exceedingly awkward position. He looked appealingly, as was his wont, up into the air and among the highest branches of the "Five Sisters" for "Passon Walden," but naturally could not discover him at that elevation.

"Come, come!" said Maryllia, imperatively. "You are not all deaf, I hope! Give me a straight answer, one of you! Who struck Spruce?"

"Mister Leach did!" said the big-boned lad who had constituted himself Spruce's defender. "We 'eerd down in the village as 'ow you'd come 'ome, miss, and as 'ow

you'd give your orders that the Five Sisters was to be left stannin', and we coomed up wi' Spruce to see 'ow Leach 'ud take it, an' 'fore we could say a wurrd Leach he up wi' his whip and cut Spruce across the for'ead as ye see——"

Maryllia raised her hand and silenced him with a gesture.

"Thank you! That will do. I understand!" She turned towards Leach——"What have you to say for yourself?"

"I take no orders from a servant," replied Leach insolently,——"I have managed this estate for ten years, and I give in my statements and receive my instructions from the firm of solicitors who have it in charge. I am not called upon to accept any different arrangement without proper notice."

Maryllia heard him out with coldly attentive patience.

"You will accept a different arrangement without any further notice at all," she said. "You will leave the premises and resign all management of my property from this day henceforward. I dismiss you, for disobedience and insolence, and for assaulting my servant, Spruce, in the execution of his duty. And as for these trees, if any man touches a bough of one of them without my permission, I will have him prosecuted. Now you know my mind!"

She sat proudly erect in her saddle, while the village hobbledehoys who had instinctively gathered round her, like steel shavings round a magnet, fairly gasped for breath. Oliver Leach dismissed! Oliver Leach, the petty tyrant, the carping, snarling jack-in-office, cast out like a handful of bad rubbish! It was like a thunderbolt fallen from heaven and riving the earth on which they stood! Bainton heard, and could scarcely keep back a chuckle of satisfaction. He longed to make Spruce understand what was

going on, but that unfortunate individual was slightly stunned by Leach's heavy blow, and sitting on the grass with his head between his two hands, was gazing, in a kind of stupefaction at the "new Missis;" so that any "bellowing" into his ear was scarcely possible.

Leach himself stared blankly and incredulously,—his face crimsoned with a sudden rush of enraged blood and then paled again, and changing his former insolent tone for one both fawning and propitiatory, he stammered out:

"I am very sorry—I—I beg your pardon, madam—I am sure,—but if you will give yourself a little time to consider,—you will see I have done my duty on this property all the time I have been connected with it. I hope you will not dismiss me for the first fault,———I—I—admit I should not have struck Spruce,—but—I—I was taken by surprise—I—I know my business,—and I am not accustomed to be interfered with—" Here his pent-up anger got the better of him and he again began to bluster. "I have done my duty—no man better!" he said in fierce accents. "There's not an acre of woodland here that isn't in a better condition than it was ten years ago—Ah!—and bringing in more money too!—and now I am to be turned off for a parcel of village idiots who hardly know a beech from an elm! I'll make a case of it! Sir Morton Pippitt knows me—I'll speak to Sir Morton Pippitt———"

"Sir Morton Pippitt!" echoed Maryllia disdainfully. "What has he to do with me or my property?" Here she suddenly spied Walden, who, in his eagerness to hear every word that passed had, unconsciously to himself moved well out of the sheltering shadow of the trees—"Are *you* Sir Morton Pippitt?"

A broad grin, deepening into a scarcely suppressed titter, went the round of the gaping young rustics. Walden

himself smiled,—and recognising that the time had now come to declare himself, he advanced a step or two and lifted his hat.

"I have not that pleasure. I am the minister of this parish, and my name is John Walden. I'm afraid I am rather a trespasser here,—but I have loved these old trees for many years, and I came up this morning,—having heard what your orders were from my gardener Bainton, —to see that those orders were properly carried out,— and also to save possible disturbance——"

He broke off. Maryllia, while he spoke had eyed him somewhat critically, and now favoured him with a charming smile.

"Thank you very much!" she said sweetly. "It was most kind of you! I wonder—" And she paused, knitting her pretty brows in perplexity; "I wonder if you could get rid of everybody for me?"

He glanced up at her in a little wonderment.

"Could you?" she repeated.

He drew nearer.

"Get rid of everybody?—you mean?——"

She leaned confidentially from her saddle.

"Yes—*you* know! Send them all about their business! Clergymen can always do that, can't they? There's really nothing more to be said or done—the trees shall not be touched,—the matter is finished. Tell all these big boys to go away—and—oh,—*you* know!"

A twinkle of merriment danced in Walden's eyes. But he turned quite a set and serious face round on the magnetised lads of the village, who hung about, loth to lose a single glance or a single word of the wonderful *"Missis"* who had the audacious courage to dismiss Leach.

"Now, boys!" he said peremptorily. "Clear away home.

and begin your day's work! You're not wanted here any longer. The trees are safe,—and you can tell everyone what Miss Vancourt says about them. Bainton! You take these fellows home,—Spruce had better go with you. Just call at the doctor's on the way and get his wound attended to. Come now, boys!—sharp's the word!"

A general scrambling movement followed this brief exordium. With shy awkwardness each young fellow lifted his cap as he shambled sheepishly past Maryllia, who acknowledged these salutes smilingly,—Bainton assisted Spruce to rise to his feet, and then took him off under his personal escort,—and only Leach remained, convulsively gripping his dog-whip which he had picked up from the ground where the lads had thrown it,—and anon striking it against his boot with a movement of impatience and irritation.

"*Good* morning, Mr. Leach!" said Walden pointedly. But Leach stood still, looking askance at Maryllia.

"Miss Vancourt," he said, hoarsely, "am I to understand that you meant what you said just now?"

Maryllia gazed at him in amazed *hauteur.*

"That I dismiss you from my service? Of course I meant it! Of course I mean it!"

"I am bound to have fair notice," he muttered. "I cannot collect all my accounts in a moment——"

"Whatever else you may do, you will leave this place at once;" said Maryllia firmly,—"I will communicate my decision to the solicitors and they will settle with you. No more words, please!"

She turned her mare slowly round on the grassy knoll, looking up meanwhile at the lovely canopy of tremulous young green above her head. John Walden watched her. So did Oliver Leach,—and with a sudden oath, rapped

out like a discordant bomb bursting in the still air, he exclaimed savagely:

"You shall repent this, my fine lady!—By God, you shall! You shall rue the day you ever saw Abbot's Manor again! You had far better have stayed with your rich Yankee relations than have made such a home-coming as this for yourself, and such an outgoing for me! My curse on you!"

Shaking his fist threateningly at her, he sprang down the knoll, and plunging through the grass and fern was soon lost to sight.

The soft colour in Maryllia's cheeks paled a little and a slight tremor ran through her frame. She looked at Walden,—then laughed carelessly.

"Guess I've given him fits!" she said, relapsing into one of her Aunt Emily's American colloquialisms, with happy unconsciousness that this particular phrase coming from her pretty lips sent a kind of shock through John's sensitive nerves. "He's not a very pleasant man to meet anyway. And it isn't altogether agreeable to be cursed on the first morning of my return home. But, after all, it doesn't matter much as there's a clergyman present!—" And her blue eyes danced mischievously. "Isn't it lucky you came? You can stop that curse on its way and send it back like a homing pigeon, can't you? What do you say when you do it? *'Retro me Sathanas,'* or something of that kind, isn't it? Whatever it is, say it now, won't you?"

Walden laughed,—he could not help laughing. She spoke with such a whimsical flippancy, and she looked so *bewitchingly* pretty.

"*Really,* Miss Vancourt, I don't think I need utter *any special* formula on this occasion," he said, gaily,

"You have really done a good action to the whole community by dismissing Leach, and good actions bring their own reward, while curses, like chickens, come home to roost. Pray forgive me for quoting copybook maxims! But, as a matter of fact, you have relieved the neighbourhood of a distressing incubus,—and for the curse of one ill-conditioned boor, you will have the thanks and blessings of all your tenantry. That will take the edge off the malediction; don't you think so?"

She turned her mare in the homeward direction, and began to guide it gently down the slope. Walking by her side, John held back one of the vast leafy boughs of the great trees to allow her to pass more easily, and glanced up at her smilingly as he put his question.

She met his eyes with an open frankness that somewhat disconcerted him.

"Well, I don't know about that!" she replied. "You see, in these days of telepathy and hypnotic suggestion, there may be something very catching about a curse. It's just like a little seed of disease;—if it falls on the right soil it germinates and spreads, and then all manner of wicked souls get the infection. I believe that in the old days everybody guessed this instinctively, without being able to express it scientifically,—and that's why they ran to the Church for protection against curses, and the evil eye, and things of that sort. See how some of the old Scottish curses cling even to this day! The only way to take the sting out of a curse is to get it transposed"—and she smiled, glancing meditatively up into the brightening blue of the sky. "Like a song, you know! If it's too low for the voice you transpose it to a higher key. I daresay the Church was able to do that in the days when

it had *real* faith——oh!—I beg your pardon!—I ought not to say that to a man of your calling."

"Why not?" said Walden. "Pray say anything you like to me, Miss Vancourt;—I should be a very poor and unsatisfactory sort of creature if I could not bear any criticism on my vocation. Besides, I quite agree with you. The early Church had certainly more faith than it has now."

"You're not a bit like a parson," said Maryllia gravely, studying his face with embarrassing candour and closeness. "You look quite a nice pleasant sort of man."

John Walden laughed again,—this time with sincere heartiness. Maryllia's eyes twinkled, and little dimples came and went round her mouth and chin.

"You seem amused at that," she said. "But I've seen a great deal of life—and I have met heaps and heaps of parsons—parsons young and parsons old—and they were all horrid, simply horrid! Some talked Bible—and others talked the *Sporting Times*—any amount of them talked the drama, and played villains in private theatricals. I never met but one real *minister*,—that is a man who ministers to the poor,—and he died in a London slum before he was thirty. I believe he was a saint; and if he had lived in the days of the early Church he would certainly have been canonised. He would have been Saint William—his name was William. But he was only one William,—I've seen hundreds of them."

"Hundreds of Williams?" queried Walden suggestively.

This time it was Maryllia who laughed,—a gay little *laugh* like that of a child.

"*No, I* guess not!" she answered. "Some of them are *real Johnnies!* Oh dear me!"—and again her laughter

broke forth; "I quite forgot!—You said *your* name was John!"

"So it is." And he smiled. "I'm sorry you don't like it!"

She checked her merriment abruptly, and became suddenly serious.

"But I do like it! You mustn't think I don't. Oh, how rude I must seem to you! Please forgive me! I really do like the name of John!"

He glanced up at her, still smiling.

"Thank you! It's very kind of you to say so!"

"You believe me, don't you?" she said, persistently.

"Of course I do! Of course I must! Though unhappily a Churchman, I am not altogether a heretic!"

The smile deepened in his eyes,—and as she met his somewhat quizzical glance a slight wave of colour rose to her cheeks and brow. She drew herself up in her saddle with a sudden proud movement and carried her little head a trifle higher. Walden looked at her now as he would have looked at a charming picture, without the least embarrassment. She appeared so extremely young to him. She awakened in his mind a feeling of kindly paternal interest, such as he might have felt for Susie Prescott or Ipsie Frost. He was not even quite sure that he considered her in any way out of the common so far as her beauty was concerned,—though he recognised that she was almost the living image of "the lady in the vi'let velvet" whose portrait adorned the gallery in Abbot's Manor. The resemblance was heightened by the violet colour of the riding dress she wore and the absence of any head-covering save her own pretty brown-gold hair.

"I'm *glad I've saved* the old trees," she said presently, *checking her mare's* pace, and looking back at the Five

Sisters standing in unmolested grandeur on their grassy throne. "I feel a pleasant consciousness of having done something useful. And they *are* beautiful! I haven't looked at them half enough. I shall come here all by myself this afternoon and bring a book and read under their lovely boughs. Just now I've only had time to cry 'rescue.'" She hesitated a moment, then added: "I'm very much obliged to you for your assistance, Mr. Walden! —and I'm glad you also like the trees. They shall never be touched in my lifetime, I assure you,—and I believe—yes, I believe I'll put something in my last will and testament about them—something binding, you know! Something that will set up a block in the way of land agents. Such trees as these ought to stand as long as Nature will allow them."

Walden was silent. Somehow her tone had changed from kind playfulness to ordinary formality, and her eyes rested upon him with a cool, slightly depreciatory expression. The mare was restless, and pawed the green turf impatiently.

"She longs for a gallop," said Maryllia, patting the fine creature's glossy neck. "Don't you, Cleo? Her name is Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. Isn't she a beauty?"

"She is indeed!" murmured Walden, with conventional politeness, though he scarcely glanced at the eulogised animal.

"She isn't a bit safe, you know," continued Maryllia. "Nobody can hold her but me! She's a perfectly magnificent hunter. I have another one who is gentleness itself, called Daffodil. My groom rides her. He could never ride Cleo." She paused, patting the mare's neck again, —*then gathering* up the reins in her small, loosely-gloved *hand, she said:* "Well, good morning, Mr. Walden! It

was most kind of you to get up so early and come to help defend my trees. I am ever so grateful to you! Pray call and see me at the Manor when you have nothing better to do. You will be very welcome!"

She nodded gracefully to him, and a few loose curls of lovely hair fell with the action like a web of sunbeams over her brow. Smiling, she tossed them back.

"Good-bye!" she called.

He raised his hat,—and in another moment the gallop of Cleopatra's swift hoofs thudded across the grass and echoed over the fields, gradually diminishing and dying away, as mare and rider disappeared within the enfolding green of the Manor woods. He stood for awhile looking after the vanishing flash of violet, brown and gold, scudding over the turf and disappearing under the closely twisted boughs of budding oak and elm,—and then started to walk home himself. His face was a study of curiously mingled expressions. Surprise, amusement, and a touch of admiration struggled for the mastery in his mind, and he was compelled to admit to himself, albeit reluctantly, that the doubtfully-anticipated "Squiress" was by no means the sort of person he had expected to see. Herein he was at one with Bainton.

"'Like a little sugar figure on a wedding-cake, looking sweet, and smiling pleasant!'" thought Walden, humorously recalling his gardener's description. "Scarcely that! She has a will of her own, and—possibly—a temper! A kind of spoilt child-woman, I should imagine; just the person to wear all the fripperies Mrs. Spruce was so anxious about the other day, and quite frivolous enough to squeeze her feet into shoes a couple of sizes too small for her. *Beautiful?* No,—her features are not regular *enough for actual beauty.* Pretty? Well,—perhaps she

is!—in a certain sense,—but I'm no judge. Fascinating? Possibly she might be—to some men. She certainly has a sweet voice, and a very well-bred manner. And I don't think she is likely to be disagreeable or discourteous. But there is nothing remarkable about her———she's just a woman—with a charming smile,—and a touch of American vivacity running through her English insularity. Just a woman—with a *way!*"

And he strode on, his terrier trotting soberly at his heels. But he was on the whole glad he had met the lady of the Manor, because now he no longer felt any uneasiness concerning her. His curiosity was satisfied,—his instinctive dislike of her had changed to a kindly toleration, and his somewhat morbid interest in her arrival had quite abated. The "Five Sisters" were saved—that was a good thing; and as for Miss Vancourt herself,—well!—she was evidently a harmless creature who would most likely play tennis and croquet all day and take very little interest in anything except herself.

"She will not interfere with me, nor I with her," said Walden with a sigh of satisfaction and relief. "And though we live in the same village, we shall be as far apart as the poles,—which is a great comfort!"

CHAPTER XI.

MEANWHILE, Maryllia cantered home through the woods in complacent and lively humour. The first few hours of her return to the home of her forefathers had certainly not been lacking in interest and excitement. She had heard and granted a village appeal,—she had stopped an *act of vandalism*,—she had saved five of the noblest trees *in England*,—she had conquered the hearts of several

village yokels,—she had thrust a tyrant out of office,—she had been cursed by the said tyrant, a circumstance which was, to say the very least of it, quite new to her experience and almost dramatic,—and,—she had "made eyes" at a parson! Surely this was enough adventure for one morning, especially as it was not yet eight o'clock. The whole day had yet to come; possibly she might be involved later on in still more thrilling and sensational episodes,—who could tell! She carolled a song for pure gaiety of heart, and told the rustling leaves and opening flowers in very charmingly pronounced French that

"Votre cœur a beau se défendre
De s'enflammer,—
Le moment vient, il faut se rendre,
Il faut aimer!"

Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, curveted and pranced daintily at every check imposed on her rein, as became an equine royalty,—she was conscious of the elastic turf under her hoofs, and glad of the fresh pure air in her nostrils,—and her mistress shared with her the sense of freedom and buoyancy which an open country and fair landscape must naturally inspire in those to whom life is a daily and abounding vigorous delight, not a mere sickly brooding over the past, or a morbid anticipation of the future. The woods surrounding Abbot's Manor were by no means depressing,—they were not dark silent vistas of solemn pine, leading into deeper and deeper gloom, but cheery and picturesque clumps of elm and beech and oak, broken at constant intervals with hazel-copse, hawthorn and eglantine,—true English woods, suggestive of delicate romance and poesy, and made magical by the songs of birds, whose *silver-throated* melodies are never heard to *sweeter advantage* than under the leafy boughs of such

unspoiled green lanes and dells as yet remain to make the charm and glamour of rural England. Primroses peeped out in smiling clusters from every mossy nook, and the pale purple of a myriad violets spread a wave of soft colour among the last year's fallen leaves, which had served good purpose in keeping the tender buds warm till Spring should lift them from their earth-cradles into full-grown blossom. Maryllia's bright eyes, glancing here and there, saw and noted a thousand beauties at every turn,—the chains of social convention and ordinance had fallen from her soul, and a joyous pulse of freedom quickened her blood and sent it dancing through her veins in currents of new exhilaration and vitality. With her multi-millionaire aunt, she had lived a life of artificial constraint, against which, despite its worldly brilliancy, her inmost and best instincts had always more or less rebelled;—now,—finding herself alone, as it were, with Mother Nature, she sprang like a child to that great maternal bosom, and nestled there with a sense of glad refreshment and peace.

"What dear wildflowers!" she murmured now, as restraining Cleopatra's coquettish gambols, she rode more slowly along, and spied the bluebells standing up among tangles of green, making exquisite contrast with the golden glow of aconites and the fragile white of wood-anemones, —"They are ever so much prettier than the hot-house things one gets any day in Paris and London! Big forced roses,—great lolling, sickly-scented lilies, and orchids—oh dear! how tired I am of orchids! Every evening a bouquet of orchids for five weeks—Sundays *not* excepted, —shall I ever forget the detestable 'rare specimens'!"

A little frown puckered her brow, and for a moment *the lines of her* pretty mouth drooped and pouted wit

a quaintly petulant expression, like that of a child going to cry.

"It was complete persecution!" she went on, crooning her complaints to herself and patting Cleopatra's arched neck by way of accompaniment to her thoughts. "Absolute dodging and spying round corners after the style of a police detective. I just hate a lover who makes his love, if it *is* love, into a kind of whip to flog your poor soul with. Roxmouth here, Roxmouth there, Roxmouth everywhere,—he was just like the water in the *Ancient Mariner* 'and not a drop to drink.' At the play, at the Opera, in the picture-galleries, at the races, at the flower-shows, at all the 'crushes' and big functions,—in London, in Paris, in New York, in St. Petersburg, in Vienna, —always 'ce cher Roxmouth'—as Aunt Emily said;—money no consideration, distance no object,—always 'ce cher Roxmouth,' stiff as a poker, clean as fresh paint, and apparently as virtuous as an old maid, with all his aristocratic family looming behind him, and a long ancestry of ghosts in the shadow of time, extending away back to some Saxon 'nobles,' who no doubt were coarse barbarians that ate more raw meat than was good for them, and had to be carried to bed dead drunk on mead. It *is* so absurd to boast of one's ancestry! If we could only just see the dreadful men who began all the great families, we should be perfectly ashamed of them I'm sure! Most of them tore up their food with their fingers. Now we Vancourts are supposed to be descended from a warrior bold, named Robert Priaulx de Vaignecourt, who fought in the Crusades. Poor Uncle Fred used to be so proud of that! He was always talking about it, especially when we were in America. He liked to try and make the *Pilgrim-Father-families* jealous. Just as he used to boast

that if he had only been born three minutes before my father, instead of three minutes after, he would have been the owner of Abbot's Manor. That three minutes' delay and consideration he took about coming into the world made him the youngest twin, and cut off his chances. And he told me that Robert the Crusader had a brother named Osmond, who was believed to have founded a monastery somewhere in this neighbourhood, and who died, so the story goes, during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, though there's no authentic trace left of either Osmond or Robert anywhere. They might, of course, have been very decent and agreeable men,—but it's rather doubtful. If Osmond went on a pilgrimage he would never have washed himself, to begin with,—it would have destroyed his sanctity. And as for Robert the warrior bold, he would have been dreadfully fierce and hairy,—and I'm quite sure I could not possibly have asked him to dinner!"

She laughed at her own fancies, and guided her mare under a drooping canopy of early-flowering wild acacia, just for the sheer pleasure of springing lightly up in her saddle to pull off a tuft of scented white blossom.

"The fact is," she continued half aloud, "there's nobody I can ask to dinner even now as it is. Not down here. The local descriptions of Sir Morton Pippitt do not tempt me to make his acquaintance, and as for the parson I met just now,—why he would be impossible!—simply impossible!" she repeated with emphasis. "I can see exactly what he's like at a glance. One of those cold, quiet, clever men who 'quiz' women and never admire them,—I know the kind of horrid University creature! A *sort of superior*, touch-me-not person who can barely *tolerate a woman's* presence in the room, and in his heart

of hearts relegates the female sex generally to the lowest class of the animal creation. I can read it all in his face. He's *rather* good-looking—not very,—his hair curls quite nicely, but it's getting grey, and so is his moustache, —he must be at least fifty, I should think. He has a good figure—for a clergyman;—and his eyes———no, I'm not sure that I like his eyes—I believe they're deceitful. I must look at them again before I make up my mind. But I *know* he's just as conceited and disagreeable as most parsons—he probably thinks that he helps to turn this world and the next round on his little finger,—and I daresay he tells the poor village folk here that if they don't obey him, they'll go to hell, and if they do, they'll fly straight to heaven and put on golden crowns at once. Dear me! What a ridiculous state of things! Fancy the dear old man in the smock who came to see me last night, with a pair of wings and a crown!"

Laughing again, she flicked Cleopatra's neck with the reins, and started off at an easy swinging gallop, turning out of the woods into the carriage drive, and never checking her pace till she reached the house.

All that day she gave marked evidence that her reign as mistress of Abbot's Manor had begun in earnest. Changing her riding dress for a sober little tailor-made frock of home-spun, she flitted busily over the old house of her ancestors, visiting it in every part, peering into shadowy corners, opening antique presses and cupboards, finding out the secret of sliding panels in the Jacobean oak that covered the walls, and leaving no room unsearched. The apartment in which her father's body had lain in its coffin was solemnly unlocked and disclosed to her view under the title of "the Ghost Room,"—whereat she was sorrowfully indignant,—so much so indeed that

Mrs. Spruce shivered in her shoes, pricked by the sting of a guilty conscience, for, if the truth be told, it was to Mrs. Spruce's own too-talkative tongue that this offending name owed its origin. Quietly entering the peaceful chamber with its harmless and almost holy air of beautiful, darkened calm, Maryllia drew up the blinds, threw back the curtains, and opened the latticed windows wide, admitting a flood of sunshine and sweet air.

"It must never be called 'the Ghost Room' again,"—she said, with a reproachful gravity, which greatly disconcerted and overawed Mrs. Spruce—"otherwise it will have an evil reputation which it does not deserve. There is nothing ghostly or terrifying about it. It is a sacred room,—sacred to the memory of one of the dearest and best of men! It is wrong to let such a room be considered as haunted,—I shall sleep in it myself sometimes, —and I shall make it bright and pretty for visitors when they come. I would put a little child to sleep in it,—for my father was a good man, and nothing evil can ever be associated with him. Death is only dreadful to the ignorant and the wicked."

Mrs. Spruce wisely held her peace, and dutifully followed her new mistress to the morning-room, where she had to undergo what might be called quite a stiff examination regarding all the household and housekeeping matters. Armed with a fascinating little velvet-bound notebook and pencil, Maryllia wrote down all the names of the different servants, both indoor and outdoor, (making a small private mark of her own against those who had served her father in any capacity, and those who were just new to the place) together with the amount of wages due every month to each,—she counted over all the fine house linen, much of which had been purchased for her mother's home-com-

ing and had never been used;—she examined with all a connoisseur's admiration the almost priceless old china with which the Manor shelves, dressers and cupboards were crowded,—and finally after luncheon and an hour's deep cogitation by herself in the library, she wrote out in a round clerkly hand certain "rules and regulations," for the daily routine of her household, and handed the document to Mrs. Spruce,—much to that estimable dame's perturbation and astonishment.

"These are my hours, Spruce," she said—"And it will of course be your business to see that the work is done punctually and with proper method. There must be no waste or extravagance,—and you will bring me all the accounts every week, as I won't have bills running up longer than that period. I shall leave all the ordering in of provisions to you,—if it ever happens that you send something to table which I don't like, I will tell you, and the mistake need not occur again. Now is there anything else?"—and she paused meditatively, finger on lip, knitting her brows—"You see I've never done any housekeeping, but I've always had notions as to how I should do it if I ever got the chance to try, and I'm just beginning. I believe in method,—and I like everything that *has* a place to be *in* its place, and everything that *has* a time, to come up to its time. It saves ever so much worry and trouble. Now let me think!—oh yes,—I knew there was another matter. Please let the gardeners and outdoor men generally know that if they want to speak to me, they can always see me from ten to half-past every morning. And, by the way, Spruce, tell the maids to go about their work quietly,—there is nothing more objectionable than a noise and fuss in the house just because *a room is being swept* and turned out. I simply hate it!

In the event of any quarrels or complaints, please refer them to me——and——and——" Here she paused again with a smile—"Yes! I think that's all—for the present! I haven't yet gone through the library or the picture-gallery;—however those rooms have nothing to do with the ordinary daily housekeeping,—if,—if I find anything wanting to be done there, I'll send for you again. But that's about all now."

Poor Mrs. Spruce curtseyed deferentially and tremulously. She was not going to have it all her own way as she had fondly imagined when she first saw the apparently child-like personality of her new lady. The child-like personality was merely the rose-flesh covering of a somewhat determined character.

"And anything I can do for you, Spruce, or for your husband," continued Maryllia, dropping her business-like tone for one of as coaxing a sweetness as ever Shakespeare's Juliet practised for the persuasion of her too tardy Nurse —"will be done with ever so much pleasure! You know that, don't you?" And she laid her pretty little hands on the worthy woman's portly shoulders—"You shall go out whenever you like—after work, of course!—duty first, pleasure second!—and you shall even grumble, if you feel like it,—and have your little naps when the midday meal is done with,—Aunt Emily's housekeeper in London used to have them, and she snored dreadfully; the second footman—*quite* a nice lad—used to tickle her nose with a straw. But I can't afford to keep a second footman—one is quite enough,—or a coachman, or a carriage;—besides, I would always rather ride than drive,—and my groom, Bennett, will only want a stable-boy to help him *with Cleo and* Daffodil. So I hope there'll be no one *downstairs to* tease you, Spruce dear, by tickling your

nose with a straw! Primmins looks much too staid and respectable to think of such a thing."

She laughed merrily,—and Mrs. Spruce for the life of her could not help laughing too. The picture of Primmins condescending to indulge in a game of "nose and straw" was too grotesque to be considered with gravity.

"Well I never, miss!" she ejaculated—"You do put things *that* funny!"

"Do I? I'm so glad!" said Maryllia demurely; "it's nice to be funny to other people, even if you're not funny to yourself. But I want you to understand from the first, Spruce, that everyone must feel happy and contented in my household. I would much rather a servant should leave me altogether, than stay on unwillingly. So if anything goes wrong, you must tell me, and I will try and set it right. Now I'm going for an hour's walk with Plato, and when I come in, and have had my tea, I'll visit the picture-gallery. I know all about it,—Uncle Fred told me" —she paused, and her eyes darkened with a wistful and deepening gravity,—then she added gently—"I shall not want you there, Spruce,—I must be quite alone."

Mrs. Spruce again curtseyed humbly, and was about to withdraw, when Maryllia called her back.

"What about the clergyman here, Mr. Walden?"—she asked—"Is he a nice man?—kind to the village people, I mean, and good to the poor?"

Mrs. Spruce gave a kind of ecstatic gasp, folded her fat hands tightly together in front of her voluminous apron, and launched forth straightway on her favourite theme.

"Mr. Walden is jest one of the finest men God ever made, miss," she said, with solemnity and unction—"You may take *my word* for it! He's *that* good, that as we *often sez, if m'appen* there ain't no saint in the Sarky an'

nowt but dust, we've got a real live saint walkin' free among us as is far more 'spectable to look at in his plain coat an' trousers than they monks an' friars in the picter-books wi' ropes round their waistses an' bald crowns, which ain't no sign to me o' bein' full o' grace, but rather loss of 'air,—an' which you will presently see yourself, miss, as 'ow Mr. Walden's done the church beautiful, like a dream, as all the visitors sez, which there isn't its like in all England—an' he's jest a father to the village an' friends with every man, woman, an' child in it, an' grudges nothink to 'elp in cases deservin', an' works like a nigger, he do, for the school, which if he'd 'ad a wife it might a' been better an' it might a' been worse, the Lord only knows, for no woman would a' come up 'ere an' stood that patient watchin' me an' my work, an' I tell you truly, Miss Maryllia, that when your boxes came an' I had to unpack 'em an' sort the clothes in 'em, I sent for Passon Walden jest to show 'im that I felt my 'sponsibility, an' he sez, sez he: 'You go on doin' your duty, Misses Spruce, an' your lady will be all right'—an' though I begged 'im to stop, he wouldn't while I was a-shakin' out your dresses with Nancy——"

Here she was interrupted by a ringing peal of laughter from Maryllia, who, running up to her, put a little hand on her mouth.

"Stop, stop, Spruce!" she exclaimed. "Oh dear, oh dear! *Do* you think I can understand all this? Did you show the Parson my clothes—actually? You did!" For Mrs. Spruce nodded violently in the affirmative. "Good gracious! What a perfectly dreadful thing to do!" And she laughed again. "And what is the saint in the Sarky?" Here she removed her hand from the mouth she was

guarding. "Say it in one word, if you can,—what is the Sarky?"

"It's in the church"—said Mrs. Spruce, dauntlessly proceeding with her flow of narrative, and encouraged thereto by the sparkling mirth in her mistress's face—"We calls it Sarky for short. Josey Letherbarrow, what reads, an' 'as a larnin', calls it the Sarky Fagus, an' my Kitty, she's studied at the school, an' *she* sez 'it's Sar-KO-fagus, mother,' which it may be or it mayn't, for the schools don't know more than the public-'ouses in my opinion,—leastways it's a great long white coffin what's supposed to 'ave the body of a saint inside it, an' Mr. Walden he discovered it when he was rebuildin' the church, an' when the Bishop come to conskrate it, he sez 'twas a saint in there an' that's why the village is called St. Rest—but you'll find it all out yourself, miss, an' as I sez an' I don't care who 'ears me, the real saint ain't in the Sarky at all,—it's just Mr. Walden himself,——"

Again Maryllia's hand closed her mouth.

"You really must stop, Spruce! You are the dearest old gabbler possible—but you *must* stop! You'll have no breath left—and I shall have no patience! I've heard quite enough. I met Mr. Walden this morning, and I'm sure he isn't a saint at all. He's a very ordinary person indeed,—*most* ordinary—not in the very least remarkable. I'm glad he's good to the people, and that they like him—that's really all that's necessary, and it's all I want to know. Go along, Spruce!—don't talk to me any more about saints *in* the Sarky or *out* of the Sarky! There never was a real saint in the world—never!—not in the shape of a man!"

With laughter still dancing in her eyes, she turned away, and Mrs. Spruce, in full possession of restored nerve

and vivacity, bustled off on her round of household duty, the temporary awe she had felt concerning the new written code of domestic "Rules and Regulations" having somewhat subsided under the influence of her mistress's gay good-humour. And Maryllia herself, putting on her hat, called Plato to her side, and started off for the village, resolved to make the church her first object of interest, in order to see the wondrous "Sarky."

"I never was so much entertained in my life!" she declared to herself, as she walked lightly along,—her huge dog bounding in front of her and anon returning to kiss her hand and announce by deep joyous barks his delight at finding himself at liberty in the open country. "Spruce is a perfect comedy in herself,—ever so much better than a stage play! And then the quaint funny men who came to see me last night,—and those village boys this morning! And the 'saintly' parson! I'm sure he'll turn out to be comic too,—in a way—he'll be the 'heavy father' of the piece. Really I never imagined I should have so much fun!"

Here, spying a delicate grey pinnacle gleaming through the trees, she rightly concluded that it belonged to the church she intended to visit, and finding a footpath leading across the fields, she followed it. It was the same path which Walden had for so many years been accustomed to take in his constant walks to and from the Manor. It soon brought her to the highroad which ran through the village, and across this it was but a few steps to the gate of the churchyard. Laying one hand on her dog's neck, she checked the great creature's gambols and compelled him to walk sedately by her side, as with hushed footsteps she entered the "Sleepy Hollow" of death's long repose, and went straight up to the church-door which, as usual, stood open.

"Stay here, Plato!" she whispered to her four-footed comrade, who, understanding the mandate, lay down at once submissively in the porch to wait her pleasure. Entering the sacred shrine she stood still,—awed by its exquisite beauty and impressive simplicity. The deep silence, the glamour of the soft vari-coloured light that flowed through the lancet windows on either side,—the open purity of the nave, without any disfiguring pews or fixed seats to mar its clear space,—(for the chairs which were used at service were all packed away in a remote corner out of sight) —the fair, slender columns, springing up into flowering capitals, like the stems of palms breaking into leaf-coronals, —the dignified plainness of the altar, with that strange white sarcophagus set in front of it,—all these taken together, composed a picture of sweet sanctity and calm unlike anything she had ever seen before. Her emotional nature responded to the beautiful in all things, and this small perfectly designed House of Prayer, with its unknown saintly occupant at rest within its walls, touched her almost to tears. Stepping on tiptoe up to the altar-rails, she instinctively dropped on her knees, while she read all that could be seen of the worn inscription on the sarcophagus from that side—"In Resurrectione—Sanctorum—Resurget." The atmosphere around her seemed surcharged with mystical suggestions,—a vague poetic sense of the superhuman and divine moved her to a faint touch of fear, and made her heart beat more quickly than its wont.

"It is lovely—lovely!" she murmured under her breath, as she rose from her kneeling attitude—"The whole church is a perfect gem of architecture! I have never seen anything more beautiful in its way,—not even the Chapel of the Thorn at Pisa. And according to Mrs. Spruce's account, the man I met this morning—the quizzical parson

with the grey-brown curly-locks, did it all at his own expense—he must really be *quite* clever,—such an unusual thing for a country clergyman!"

She took another observant survey of the whole building, and then went out again into the churchyard. There she paused, her dog beside her, shading her eyes from the sun as she looked wistfully from right to left across the sadly suggestive little hillocks of mossy turf besprinkled with daisies, in search of an object which was as a landmark of disaster in her life. She saw it at last, and moved slowly towards it,—a plain white marble cross, rising from a smooth grassy eminence, where a rambling rose, carefully and even artistically trained, was just beginning to show pale creamy buds among its glossy dark green leaves. Great tears rose to her eyes and fell unheeded, as she read the brief inscription—"Sacred to the Memory of Robert Vancourt of Abbot's Manor," this being followed by the usual dates of birth and death, and the one word "Resting." With tender touch Maryllia gathered one leaf from the climbing rose foliage, and kissing it amid her tears, turned away, unable to bear the thoughts and memories which began to crowd thickly upon her. Almost, she seemed to hear her father's deep mellow voice which had been the music of her childhood, playfully saying as was so often his wont:—"Well, my little girl! How goes the world with you?" Alas, the world had gone very ill with her for a long, long time after his death. Hers was too loving and passionately clinging a nature to find easy consolation for such a loss. Her uncle Frederick, though indulgent to her and always kind, had never filled her father's place,—her uncle Frederick's American wife, had, *in spite of* much conscientious tutelage and chaperonage, *altogether failed* to win her affection or sympathy. The

sorrowful sense that she was an orphan, all alone as it were with herself to face the mystery of life, never deserted her,—and it was perhaps in the most brilliant centres of society that this consciousness of isolation chiefly weighed upon her. She saw other girls around her with their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters,—but she —she, by the very act of being born had caused her mother's death,—and she well knew that her father's heart, quietly as he had endured his grief to all outward appearances, had never healed of that agonising wound.

"I think I should never have come into the world at all,"—she said to herself with a sigh, as she returned over the fields to the Manor. "I am no use to anybody,—I never have been of any use. Aunt Emily says all I have to do to show my sense of proper feeling and gratitude to her for her care of me is to marry—and marry well—marry Roxmouth, in short—he will be a duke when his father dies, and Aunt Emily would like to have the satisfaction of leaving her millions to enrich an English dukedom. Nothing could commend itself more favourably to her ideas—only it just happens *my* ideas won't fit in the same groove. Oh dear! Why can't I be 'amenable' and become a future duchess, and 'build up' the fortunes of a great family? I don't know I'm sure,—except that I don't feel like it. Great families don't appeal to me. I shouldn't care if there were none left. They are never interesting at the best of times,—perhaps out of several of them may come one clever man or woman,—and all the rest will be utter noodles. It isn't worth while to marry Roxmouth on such dubious grounds of possibility!"

Entering the Manor, she was conscious of some fatigue and listlessness,—a touch of depression weighed down her naturally bright spirits. She exchanged her home-spun

walking dress for a tea-gown, and descended somewhat languidly to the morning-room where tea was served with more ceremoniousness than on the previous day, Primmins having taken command, with the assistance of the footman. Both men-servants stole respectful glances at their mistress, as she sat pensively alone at the open window, looking out on the verdant landscape that spread away from the terrace, in undulations of lawn, foliage and field to the last border of trees that closed in Abbot's Manor grounds from the public highway. Both would have said had they been asked, that she was much too pretty and delicate to be all alone in the great old house, with no companion of her own age to exchange ideas with by speech or glance,—and, with that masculine self-assurance which is common to all the lords of creation, whether they be emperors or household domestics, they would have opined that "she ought to be married." In which they would entirely have agreed with Maryllia's "dragon" Aunt Emily. But Maryllia's own mind was far from being set on such themes as love and marriage. Her meditations were melancholy, and not unmixed with self-reproach. She blamed herself for having stayed away so long from her childhood's home, and her father's grave.

"I might have visited it at least once a year!" she thought with sharp compunction—"I never really forgot,—why did I *seem* to forget?"

The sun was sinking slowly in a glory of crimson and amber cloud, when, having resolved upon what she was going to do, she entered the picture-gallery. Softly she trod the polished floor,—with keen quick instinct and appreciative eyes, she noted the fine Vandyke portraits,—the exquisite Greuze that shone out, star-like, from a dark corner of the panelled walls,—and walking with measured

pace she went straight up to the picture of "Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt"—and gazed at it with friendly and familiar eyes.

"I know *you* quite well!"—she said, addressing the painted beauty—"I have often dreamed about you since I left home. I always admired you and wanted to be like you. I remember when I must have been about seven or eight years old, I ran in from a game in the garden one summer's afternoon, and I knelt down in front of you and I said: 'Pray God make little Maryllia as pretty as big Mary Elia.' And I think,—I really *do* think—though of course I'm not half or quarter as pretty, I'm just a little like you! Just a very, very little! For instance my hair is the same colour—almost—and my eyes—no! I'm sure I haven't such beautiful eyes as yours—I wish I had!"

Her lovely ancestress appeared to smile,—if she could have spoken from the canvas that held her painted memory she might have said:—"You have eyes that mirror the sunshine,—you have life, and I am dead,—your day is still with you—mine is done! For me love and the world's delight are ended,—and whither my phantom fairness has fled, who knows! But you are a vital breathing essence of beauty—be glad and rejoice in it while you may!" Some thought of this kind would have suggested itself to an imaginative beholder had such an one stood by to compare the picture with its almost twin living copy. Maryllia however had a very small stock of vanity,—she was only pleasantly aware that she possessed a certain grace and fascination not common to the ordinary of her sex, but beyond that she rated her personal charms at very slight value. The portrait of Mary Elia Adelgisa made her more seriously discontented with herself than ever,—*and after closely* studying the picturesque make of

the violet velvet riding-dress which the fair one of Charles the Second's day had worn, and deciding that she would have one "created" for her own adornment exactly like it, she turned towards the other end of the gallery. There hung that preciously guarded mysterious portrait of her dead mother, which she herself had never gazed upon, covered close with its dark green baize curtain,—a curtain no hand save her father's had ever dared to raise. She remembered how often he had used to enter here all alone and lock the doors, remaining thus in sorrow and solitude many hours. She recalled her own childish fears when, by chance running in to look at the pictures for her own entertainment, or to play with her ball on a rainy day for the convenience of space and a lofty ceiling, she was suddenly checked and held in awe by the sight of that great gilded frame enshrining the to her unknown presentment of a veiled Personality. Her father alone was familiar with the face hidden behind that covering which he had put up with his own hands,—fastening it by means of a spring pulley, which in its turn was secured to the wall by lock and key. Ever since his death Maryllia had worn that key on a gold chain hidden in her bosom, and she drew it out now with a beating heart and many tremors of hesitation. The trailing folds of her pretty tea-gown, all of the filmiest old lace and ivory-hued cashmere, seemed to make an obtrusive noise as they softly swept the floor, —she felt almost as though she were about to commit a sacrilege and break open a shrine,—yet——

"I must see her!" she said, whisperingly;—"I shall not offend her memory. I have never done anything very wrong in my life,—if I had, I should have reason to be *afraid*—or ashamed,—and then of course wouldn't dare *to look at* her. I have often been silly and frivolous and

houghtless,—but never spiteful or malicious, or really vicked. I could meet my father if he were here, just as rankly as if I were still a little girl,—and I think he would vish me to see his Dearest now! His Dearest! He always called her that!"

With the breath coming and going quickly through her parted lips, she stepped slowly and timidly up to that corner in the wall behind the picture, where the fastenings of the spring pulley were concealed, and fitted the key into the padlock which guarded it. The light of the setting sun threw a flame of glory aslant through the windows, and filled the gallery with a warm rush of living colour and radiance, and as she removed the padlock, and came to the front of the picture to pull the curtain-cord, she stood, unconsciously to herself, in a pure halo of gold, which intensified the brown and amber shades of her hair and the creamy folds of her gown, so that she resembled "an angel newly drest, save wings, for heaven," such as one may see delineated on the illuminated page of some antique missal. Her hand trembled, as at the first touch on the pulley the curtain began to move,—inch by inch it ascended, showing pale glimmerings of white and rose, —still higher it moved, giving to the light a woman's beautiful hand, so delicately painted as to seem almost living. The hand held a letter,—and plainly on the half unfolded scroll could be read the words:

"Thine till death,
ROBERT VANCOURT."

Another touch, and the whole covering rolled up swiftly to its full height,—while Maryllia breathless with excitement and interest gazed with all her soul in her eyes at the ex*quisite, dreamy, poetic* loveliness of the face disclosed.

All the beauty of girlhood with the tenderness of womanhood,—all the visions of young romance, united to the fulfilled passion of the heart,—all the budding happiness of a radiant life,—all the promise of a perfect love,—these were faithfully reflected in the purely moulded features, the dark blue caressing eyes, and the sweet mouth, which to Maryllia's fervid imagination appeared to tremble plaintively with a sigh of longing for the joy of life that had been snatched away so soon. Arrayed in simplest white, with a rose at her breast, and her husband's letter clasped in her hand, the fair form of the young bride that never came home gathered from the sunset-radiance an aspect of life, and seemed to float forth from the dark canvas like a holy spirit of beauty and blessing. Shadow and Substance—dead mother and living child—these twain gazed on each other through cloud-veils of impenetrable mystery,—nor is it impossible to conceive that some intangible contact between them might, through the transference of a thought, a longing, a prayer, have been realised at that mystic moment. With a sudden cry of irresistible emotion Maryllia stretched out her arms, and dropping on her knees, broke out into a passion of tears.

"Oh mother, mother!" she sobbed—"Oh darling mother! How I would have loved you!"

CHAPTER XII.

In such wise, under the silent benediction of the lost and loving dead, the long-deserted old Manor received back the sole daughter of its ancestry to that protection which we understand, or did understand at one time in *our history*, as "Home." Home was once a safe and sacred *institution in* England. There seemed no likelihood of its

ever being supplanted by the public restaurant. That it has, in a great measure, been so supplanted, is no advantage to the country, and that many women, young and old, prefer to be seen in gregarious over-dressed hordes, taking their meals in Piccadilly eating-houses, rather than essay the becoming grace of a simple and sincere hospitality to their friends in their own homes, is no evidence of their improved taste or good breeding. Abbot's Manor was in every sense "Home" in the old English sense of the word. Its ancient walls, hallowed by long tradition, formed a peaceful and sweet harbour of rest for a woman's life,—and the tranquil dignity of her old-world surroundings with all the legends and memories they awakened, soon had a beneficial effect on Maryllia's impressionable temperament, which, under her aunt's "social" influence, had been more or less chafed and uneasy and conscious of artificial restraint. She began to feel at peace with herself and all the world,—while the relief she experienced at having deliberately severed herself by both word and act from the undesired attentions of a too-persistent and detested lover in the person of Lord Roxmouth, was as keen and pleasurable as that of a child who has run away from school. She was almost confident that the fact of her having thrown off her aunt's protection together with all hope of inheriting her aunt's wealth, would be sufficient to keep him away from her for the future. "For it is Aunt Emily's money he wants—not me,"—she said to herself—"He doesn't care a jot about me personally—any woman will do, provided she has the millions. And when he knows I've given up the millions, and don't intend ever to have the millions, he'll leave me alone. And he'll go over to America in search of somebody else—some proud

daughter of oil or pork or steel!—and what a blessing that will be!"

Meanwhile, such brief excitement as had been caused in St. Rest by the return of "th' owld Squire's gel" and by the almost simultaneous dismissal of Oliver Leach, had well-nigh abated. No new agent had as yet been appointed, though it was rumoured in the village that Miss Vancourt had under her consideration the claims of numerous applicants for the post. Leach had left the immediate vicinity, but having employment on Sir Morton Pippitt's lands, he had secured a cottage for himself in the small outlying hamlet of Badsworth. He also undertook some work for the Reverend "Putty" Leveson in assisting him to form an entomological collection for the private museum at Badsworth Hall. Mr. Leveson had a singular fellow-feeling for insects,—he studied their habits, and collected specimens of various kinds in bottles, or "pinned" them on cardboard trays,—he was an interested observer of the sprightly manners practised by the harvest-bug, and the sagacious customs of the ruminating spider, —as well as the many surprising and agreeable talents developed by the common flea. Leach's virulent hatred of Maryllia Vancourt was not lessened by the apparently useful and scientific nature of the employment he had newly taken up under the guidance of his reverend instructor,—and whenever he caught a butterfly and ran his murderous pin through its quivering body at Leveson's bland command, he thought of her, and wished vindictively that she might perish as swiftly and utterly as the winged lover of the flowers. Every small bright thing in Nature's garden that he slew and brought home as trophy, inspired him with the same secret fierce desire. The act of killing a beautiful or harmless creature gave him pleasure, and

he did not disguise it from himself. The Reverend "Putty" was delighted with his aptitude, and with the many valuable additions he made to the "specimen" cards and bottles, and the two became constant companions in their search for fresh victims among the blossoming hedgerows and fields. St. Rest, as a village, was only too glad to be rid of Leach's long detested presence to care anything at all as to his further occupations or future career,—and only Bainton kept as he said "an eye on him." But Bainton was a somewhat curious personage,—talkative as he showed himself on most occasions, he was both shrewd and circumspect; no stone was more uncommunicative than he when he chose. In his heart he had set Maryllia Vancourt as second to none save his own master, John Walden,—her beauty and grace, her firm action with regard to the rescue of the "Five Sisters," and her quick dismissal of Oliver Leach, had all inspired him with the most unbounded admiration and respect, and he felt that he now had a double interest in life,—the "Passon"—and the "lady of the Manor." But he found very little opportunity to talk about his new and cherished theme of Miss Vancourt and Miss Vancourt's many attractions to Walden,—for John always "shut him up" on the subject with quite a curt and peremptory decision whenever he so much as mentioned her name. Which conduct on the part of one who was generally so willing to hear and patient to listen, somewhat surprised Bainton, "For," he argued—"there ain't much doin' in the village,—we ain't always 'on the go'—an' when a pretty face comes among us, surely it's worth looking at an' pickin' to pieces as 'twere. But Passon's that sharp on me when I sez any little thing wot might be *interestin'* about the lady, that I'm thinkin' *he's got out o' the habit* o' knowin' when a face is a male

or a female one, which is wot often happens to bacheldors when they gits fixed like old shrubs in one pertikler spot o' ground. Now I should a' said he'd a' bin glad to 'ear of somethin' new an' oncommon as 'twere,—he likes it in the way o' flowers, an' why not in the way o' wimmin? But Passon ain't like other folk—he don't git on with wimmin nohow—an' the prettier they are the more he seems skeered off them."

But such opinions as Bainton entertained concerning his master, he kept to himself, and having once grasped the fact that any mention of Miss Vancourt's ways or Miss Vancourt's looks appeared to displease rather than to entertain the Reverend John, he avoided the subject altogether. This course of action on his part, if the truth must be told, was equally annoying to Walden, who was in the curious mental condition of wishing to know what he declined to hear. For the rest, the village generally grew speedily accustomed to the presence of the mistress of the Manor. She had fulfilled her promise of paying a visit to Josey Letherbarrow, and had sat with the old man in his cottage, talking to him for the better part of two hours. Rumour asserted that she had even put the kettle on the fire for him, and had made his tea. Josey himself was reticent,—and beyond the fact that he held up his head with more dignity, and showed a touch of more conscious superiority in his demeanour, he did not give himself away by condescending to narrate any word of the lengthy interview that had taken place between himself and "th' owld Squire's little gel." One remarkable thing was noticed by the villagers and commented upon,—Miss Vancourt had now passed two Sundays in their midst, and *had never* once attended church. Her servants were always *there at* morning service, but she herself was absent. This

occasioned much whispering and head-shaking in the little community, and one evening the subject was openly discussed in the bar-room of the "Mother Huff" by a group of rustic worthies whose knowledge of matters theological and political was, by themselves, considered profound. Mrs. Buggins had started the conversation, and Mrs. Buggins was well known to be a lady both pious and depressing. She presided over her husband's "public" with an air of meek resignation, not unmixed with sorrowful protest, —she occasionally tasted the finer cordials in the bar-room, and was often moved to gentle tears at the excellence of their flavour,—she had a chronic "stitch in the side," and a long smooth pale yellow countenance from which the thin grey hair was combed well back from the temples in the frankly unbecoming fashion affected by the provincial British matron. She began her remarks by plaintively opining that "it was a very strange thing not to see Miss Vancourt at church on either of the Sundays that had passed since her return—very strange! Perhaps she was 'High'? Perhaps she had driven into Riversford to attend the 'processional' service of the Reverend Francis Anthony?"

"Perhaps she ain't done nothing of the sort!"—growled a thick-set burly farmer, who with a capacious mug of ale before him was sucking at his pipe with as much zeal as a baby at its bottle. "Ef you cares for my 'pinion, which m'appen you doan't, she's neither Low nor 'Igh. She's no Seck. If she b'longed to a Seck, she wouldn't be readin' on a book under the Five Sisters last Sunday marnin' when the bells was a-ringin' for church time. I goes past 'er, an' I sez 'Marnin', mum!' an' she looks up smilin'-like, an' sez she: 'Good marnin'! Nice day, isn't it?' *'Splendid day, mum,'* sez I, an' she went on readin',

an' I went on a-walkin'. I sez then, and I sez now, she ain't no Seck."

"Example," sighed Mrs. Buggins, "is better than precept. It would be more decent if the lady showed herself in church as a lesson to others,—if *she* did so more lost sheep might follow!"

"Hor-hor-hor!" chuckled Bainton, from a corner of the room—"Don't you worrit yourself, Missis Buggins, 'bout no lost sheep! Sheep allus goes where there's somethin' to graze upon,—leastways that's my 'sperience, an' if there ain't no grazin' there ain't no sheep. An' them as grazes on Passon Walden, gittin' out of 'im all they can to 'elp 'em along, wouldn't go to church, no more than Miss Vancourt do, if they didn't know wot a man 'e is to be relied on in times o' trouble, an' a reg'lar 'usband to the parish in sickness an' in 'elth, for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, till death do 'im part. Miss Vancourt don't want nothin' out of 'im as all we doos—an' she kin show 'er independence ef she likes to by stayin' away from church when she fancies, an' readin' books instead of 'earin' sermons,—there ain't no harm in that."

"I'm not so sure that I agree with you, Mr. Bainton" —said a stout oily-looking personage, named Netlips, the grocer and "general store" dealer of the village, a man who was renowned in the district for the profundity and point of his observations at electoral meetings, and for the entirely original manner in which he "used" the English language—"Public worship is a necessary evil. It is a factor in vulgar civilisations. Without it, the system of religious politics would fall into cohesion,—absolute cohesion!" And he rapped his fist on the table with a *smartness* that made his hearers jump. "At the last meeting I addressed in this division, I said we must support

the props. The aristocracy must bear them on their shoulders. If your Squire stays away from church, he may be called a heathen with propriety, though a Liberal. And why? Because he makes public exposure of himself as a heathen negative. He is bound to keep up the church factor in the community. Otherwise he runs straight aground on Cohesion."

This oratorical outburst on the part of Mr. Netlips was listened to with respectful awe and admiration.

"Aye, aye!" said Roger Buggins, who as "mine host" stood in his shirt sleeves at the entrance of his bar, surveying his customers and mentally counting up their reckonings —"Cohesion would never do—cohesion government would send the country to pieces. You're right, Mr. Netlips,—you're right! Props must be kep' up!"

"I don't see no props in goin' to church"—said Dan Ridley, the little working tailor of the village—"I goes because I likes Mr. Walden, but if there was a man in the pulpit I *didn't* like, I'd stop away. There's a deal too many wolves in sheep's clothing getting ordained in the service o' the Lord, an' I don't blame Miss Vancourt if so be she takes time to find out the sort o' man Mr. Walden is before settin' under him as 'twere. She can say prayers an' read 'em too in her own room an' study the Bible all right without goin' to church. Many folks as goes to church reg'lar are downright mean lyin' raskills—and don't never read their Bibles at all. Mebbe they does as much harm as what Mr. Netlips calls Cohesion, though I don't myself purfess to understand Government language, it bein' too deep for me."

Mr. Netlips *smiled* condescendingly, and nodded as *one who should say*—"You do well, my poor fellow, to be

humble in my presence"—and buried his nose in his tankard of ale.

"Mebbe Cohesion's got hold o' my red cow"—said the burly farmer, who had spoken before—"For she's as ailin' as ever she was, an' if I lose her, I loses a bit o' my livin'. An' that's what I sez an' 'olds by, no church-goin' seems to 'elp us in a bit o' trouble, an' it ain't decent or Christian like, so it 'pears, to pray to the Almighty for the savin' of a cow. I asked Passon Walden if 'twould be right, for the cow's as valuable to me as ever my wife was when she was alive, if not more, an' he sez quite pleasant-like—'Well no, Mister Thorpe, I think it best not to make any sort of special prayer for the poor beast, but just do all you can for it, and leave the rest to Providence. A cow is worldly goods, you see—and we're not quite justified in praying to be allowed to keep our worldly goods.' 'Ain't we?' I sez—'Is that a fact?' He smiled and said it was. So I thanked him and comed away. But I've been thinkin' it over since, an' I sez to myself—ef we ain't to pray for keepin' an' 'avin' our worldly goods, wot *'ave* we got to pray for?"

"Oh Mr. Thorpe!" ejaculated Mrs. Buggins, almost tearfully—"It is not *this* world but the *next,* that we must think of! We must pray for our *souls!*"

"Well, marm, I ain't got a *'soul'* wot I knows on—an' as for the next world, if there ain't no cattle farmin' there, I reckon I'll be out o' work. Do *you* count on keepin' a bar in the 'eavenly country?"

A loud guffaw went the round of the room, and Mrs. Buggins gasped with horror.

"Oh, Roger!" she murmured, addressing her portly spouse, who at once took up the argument.

"*You* goes too fur—you goes too fur, Mister Thorpe!"

he said severely—"There ain't no keepin' bars nor farmin' carried on in the next world, nor marryin' nor givin' in marriage. We be all as the angels there."

"A nice angel you'll make too, Mr. Buggins!" said Farmer Thorpe, as he sent his tankard to be refilled—"Lord! We won't know you!"

Again the laugh went round, and Mrs. Buggins precipitately retired to her "inner parlour" there to recover from the shock occasioned to her religious feelings by the irreverend remarks of her too matter-of-fact customer. Meanwhile Dan Ridley, the tailor, had again reverted to the subject of Miss Vancourt.

"There's one thing about her comin' to church,"—he said—"If so be as she *did* come it 'ud do us all good, for she's real pleasant to look at. I've seen her a many times in the village."

"Ah, so have I!" chorussed two or three more men.

"She's been in to see Adam Frost's children an' she gave Baby Hippolyta a bag o' sweeties,"—said Bainton. "An' she's called at the schoolhouse, but Miss Eden, she worn't in an' Susie Prescott saw her, an' Susie was *that* struck that she 'adn't a wurrd to say, so she tells us, an' Miss Vancourt she went to old Josey Letherbarrow's straight away an' there she stayed iver so long. She ain't called at *our* house yet."

"Which 'ouse might you be a-meanin', Tummas?" queried Farmer Thorpe, with a slow grin—"Your own or your measter's?"

"When we speaks in the plural we means not one, but two,"—rejoined Bainton with dignity. "An' when I sez *'our'* I means myself an' Passon, which Miss Vancourt ain't as yet left her card on Passon. He went up in a great 'urry one afternoon when he *knowed* she was out,—he

knowed it, 'cos I told 'im as 'ow I'd seen her gallopin' by on that mare of hers which they calls Cleopatra—an' away 'e run like a March 'are, an' he ups to the Manor and down again, an' sez he, laughin' like: 'Ive done my dooty by the lady' sez he—'I've left my card.' That was three days ago, an' there ain't been no return o' the perliteness up to the present——"

Here he broke off and began to drink his ale, as a small dapper man entered the bar-room with a brisk step and called for "a glass of home-brewed," looking round on those assembled with a condescending smile. All of them knew him as Jim Bennett, Miss Vancourt's groom.

"Well, mates!" he said with a sprightly air of familiarity —"All well and hearty?"

"*As* yourself, Mr. Bennett"—replied Roger Buggins, acting as spokesman for the rest, and personally serving him with the foaming draught he had ordered. "Which we likewise trusts your lady is well?"

"My lady enjoys the best of health, thank you!" said Bennett, with polite gravity. And tossing off the contents of his glass, he signified by an eloquent gesture and accompanying wink, that he was "good for another."

"We was just a-sayin' as you come in, Mr. Bennett," observed Dan Ridley, "that we'd none of us seen your lady at church yet on Sundays. Mebbe she ain't of our 'persuasion' as they sez, or mebbe she goes into Riversford, preferrin' 'Igh services——"

Bennett smiled a superior smile, and leaning easily against the bar, crossed his legs and surveyed the company generally with a compassionate air.

"I suppose it's quite a business down here,—goin' to *church, eh?*" he queried—"Sort of excitement like—only *bit of fun* you've got—helps to keep you all alive! That's

the country way, but Lord bless you!—in town we're not taking any!"

Bainton looked up,—and Mr. Netlips loosened his collar and lifted his head, as though preparing himself for another flow of "cohesion" eloquence. Farmer Thorpe turned his bull-neck slowly round, and brought his eyes to bear on the speaker.

"How d'ye make that out, Mr. Bennett?" he demanded. "Doan't ye sarve the A'mighty same in town as in country?"

"Not a bit of it!" replied Bennett airily—"You're a long way behind the times, Mr. Thorpe!—you are indeed, beggin' your pardon for sayin' so! The 'best' people have given up the Almighty altogether, owing to recent scientific discoveries. They've taken to the Almighty Dollar instead which no science can do away with. And Sundays aren't used any more for church-going, except among the middle-class population,—they're just 'Bridge' days with *our* set —Bridge lunches, Bridge suppers,—every Sunday's chock full of engagements to 'Bridge,' right through the 'season.'"

"That's cards, ain't it?" enquired Dan Ridley.

"Just so! Harmless cards!" rejoined Bennett—"Only you can chuck away a few thousands or so on 'em if you like!"

Mr. Netlips here pushed aside his emptied ale-glass and raised his fat head unctuously out of his stiff shirt-collar.

"Are we to understand,"—he began ponderously, "that Miss Vancourt is addicted to this fashion of procrastinating the Lord's Day?"

Bennett straightened his dapper figure suddenly.

"Now don't *you* put yourself out, Mr. Netlips, don't, *that's a good feller!*" he said in sarcastically soothing tones

—"There's no elections going on just at present—when there is you can bring your best leg foremost, and rant away for all you're worth! My lady don't gamble, if that's what you mean,—though she's always with the swagger set, and likely so to remain. But you keep up your spirits!—*your* groceries 'ull be paid for all right!—she don't run up no bills—so don't *you* fear, cards or no cards! And as for procrastinating the Lord's Day, whatever that may be, I could name to you the folks what does a deal worse than play 'Bridge' on Sundays. And who are *they?* Why the clergymen theirselves! And how does they do worse? Why by tellin' lies as fast as they can stick! They says we're all going to heaven if we're good,—and they don't know nothing about it,—and we're all going to hell if we're bad, and they don't know nothing about *that* neither! I tell you, as I told you at first, in town we've got beyond all that stuff—we're just not taking any!"

He paused, and there was a deep silence, while he drank off his second glass of ale. The thoughts of every man present were apparently too deep for words.

"You're a smart chap!" said Bainton at last, breaking the mystic spell and rising to take his leave—"An' I don't want to argify with ye, for I 'spect you're about right in what you sez about Sunday ways in town—but I tell ye what, young feller!—you've got to 'ave a deal o' patience an' a deal o' pity for they poor starveling sinners wot gits boxed up in cities an' never ain't got no room to look at the sky, or see the wide fields with all the daisies blowin' open to the sun. No wonder they're so took up wi' their scinetific muddlins over worms an' microbes an' sich-like, *as to 'ave* forgot what the Almighty is doin' in the workin' *o' the Universe*,—but it's onny jest like poor prisoners in

á cell wot walks up an' down, up an' down, countin' the stones in the wall with scinetific multiplication-like, an' 'splainin' to their poor lonely selves as how many stones makes a square foot, an' so many square feet makes a square yard, an' on they goes a-walkin' their mis'able little round an' countin' their mis'able little sums, an' all the time just outside the prison the flowers is all bloomin' wild an' the birds singin' an' the blue sky over it all with God smilin' behind it. That's 'ow 'tis, Mr. Bennett!" and Bainton looked into the lining of his cap as was his wont before he put it on his head—"I believe all you say right enough an' it don't put me out nohow—I've seen too much o' natur to be shook off my 'old on the Almighty—for there's no worm wot ain't sure of a rose or some kind o' flower an' fruit somewhere, though m'appen the poor blind thing don't know where to find it. It's a case o' leadin' on, an' guidin' beyond our knowledge, Mr. Bennett,—an' that's wot Passon Walden tells us. *He* don't bother us wi' no 'hows' nor 'whys' nor 'wherefores'—he says we can *feel* God with us in our daily work, an' so we can, if we've a mind to. Daily work and common things shows Him to us,—why look there!"—here he pulled from his pocket a small paper bag, and opening it, showed some dry loose seed—"There ain't nothin' commoner than that! That's pansy seed—a special stock too,—well now, if you didn't *know* how common it is, wouldn't it seem a miracle as wonderful as any in the Testymen, that out o' that handful o' dust like, the finest flowers of purple an' yellow will come?—aye! some o' them two to three inches across, an' every petal like velvet an' silk. If so be you don't b'lieve in a God, Mr. Bennett, owin' to town opinions, you try the gardenin' business! That'll make a man of ye! I allus *sez if Adam had stuck* to the gardenin' business an' left

the tailorin' trade alone we'd have all been in Eden now." His eyes twinkled, as glancing round the company, he saw that his words had made an impression and awakened a responsive smile — "Good night t'ye!" And touching Bennett on the shoulder in passing, he added: "You come an' see me, my lad, when you feels like goin' a bit in the scinetific line. Mebbe I can tell ye a few pints wot the learned gentlemen in London don't know. Anyway, a little church-goin' under Passon Walden won't do *you* no 'arm, nor your lady neither, if she's what I takes her for, which is believin' her to be all good as wimmin goes. An' when Passon warms to his work an' tells ye plain as 'ow everything's ordained for the best, an' as 'ow every flower's a miracle of the Lord, an' every bird's song a bit o' the Lord's own special music, it 'eartens ye up an' makes ye more 'opeful o' your own poor mis'able self—it do reely now!"

With another friendly pat on the groom's shoulder, and a cheery smile, Bainton passed out, and left the rest of the company in the "Mother Huff" tap-room solemnly gazing upon one another.

"He speaks straight, he do," said Farmer Thorpe. "An' he ain't no canter,—he's just plain Tummas, an' wot he sez he means."

"Here's to his 'elth,—a game old boy!" said Bennett good-humouredly, ordering another glass of ale. "It's quite a treat to meet a man like him, and I shan't be above owning that he's got a deal of right on his side. But what he says ain't Orthodox Church teaching."

"Mebbe not," said Dan Ridley, "but it's Passon Walden's teachin', an' if you ain't 'eard Passon yet, Mister *Bennett, I'd* advise ye to go next Sunday. An' if your *lady 'ud* make up her mind to go too just for once——"

Bennett gave an expressive gesture.

"*She* won't go—you may depend on that!" he said. "She's had too much of parsons as it is. Why Mrs. Fred —that's her American aunt—was regular pestered with 'em coming beggin' of her for their churches and their windows and their schools and their infants and their poor, lame, blind, sick of all sorts, as well as for theirselves. D'rectly they knew she was a millionaire lady, they 'adn't got but one thought—how to get some of the millions out of her. There was three secretaries kept when we was in London, and they'd hardly time for bite nor sup with all the work they 'ad, refusin' scores of churches and religious folks all together. Miss Maryllia's got a complete scare o' parsons. Whenever she see a shovel-hat coming she just flew. When she was in Paris it was the Catholics as wanted money—nuns, sisters of the poor, priests as 'ad been turned out by the Government,—and what not,— and out in America it was the Christian Scientists all the time with such a lot of tickets for lectures and fal-lals as you never saw,—then came the Spiritooalists with their seeances; and altogether the Vancourt family got to look on all sorts of religions merely as so many kinds of beggin' boxes which if you dropped money into you went straight to the Holy-holies, and if you didn't you dropped down into the great big D's. No!—I don't think anyone need expect to see my lady at church—it's the last place she'd ever think of going to."

This piece of information was received by his hearers with profound gravity. No one spoke, and during the uncomfortable pause Bennett gave a careless "Good night!" —and took his departure.

"Things is come to a pretty pass in this 'ere country," then said Mr. Netlips grandiosely, "when the woman who

is merely the elevation of the man exhibits in public a conviction to which her status is unfitted. If the lady who now possesses the Manor were under the submission of a husband, he would naturally assume the control which is governmentally retaliative and so compel her to include the religious considerations of the minority in her communicative system."

Farmer Thorpe looked impressed, but slightly puzzled.

"You sez fine, Mr. Netlips,—you sez fine," he observed respectfully. "Not that I altogether understands ye, but that's onny my want of book-larnin' and not spellin' through the dictionary as I oughter when I was a youngster. Howsomever I makes bold to guess wot you're drivin' at and I dessay you may be right. But I'm fair bound to own that if it worn't for Mr. Walden I shouldn't be found in church o' Sundays neither, but lyin' flat on my back in a field wi' my face turned up to the sun, a-thinkin' of the goodness o' God and hopin' He'd put a hand out to 'elp make the crops grow as they should do. Only Passon he be a rare good man, and he do speak to the 'art of ye so wise-like and quiet, and that's why I goes to hear him and sez the prayers wot's writ for me to say and does as he asks me to do. But if I'd been unfort'nit enough to live in the parish of Badsworth under that old liar Leveson, I'd a' put my fist in his jelly face 'fore I'd a' listened to a word he had to say! Them's my sentiments, mates!—and you can read 'em how you like, Mr. Netlips. God's in heaven we know,—but there's onny churches on earth, an' we 'as to make sure whether there's men or devils inside of 'em 'fore we goes kneelin' and grubbin' in front of 'uman idols—Good night t'ye!"

With these somewhat disjointed remarks Farmer Thorpe *strode out of* the tap-room, whistling loudly to his dog as

he reached the door. The heavy tramp of his departing feet echoed along the outside lane and died away, and Roger Buggins, glancing at the sheep-faced clock in the bar, opined that it was "near closin' hour." All the company rose and began to take their leave.

"Church or no church, Miss Vancourt's a real lady!" —declared Dan Ridley emphatically—"She may have her reasons, an' good ones too, for not attending service, but she ain't no heathen, I'm sartin' sure o' that."

"You cannot argumentarially be sure of what you do not know,"—said Mr. Netlips, with a tight smile, buttoning on his overcoat—"A heathen is a proscription of the law and cannot enjoy the rights of the commons."

Dan stared.

"There ain't no proscription of the law in stayin' away from church," he said. "Nobody's bound to go. Lords nor commons can't compel us."

Mr. Netlips shook his head and frowned darkly, with the air of one who could unveil a great mystery if he chose.

"Compulsion is a legal community," he said—"And while powerless to bring affluence to the Christian conscience, it culminates in the citizenship of the heathen. Miss Vancourt, as her father's daughter, should be represented by the baptised spirit and not by the afflatus of the ungenerate. Good night!"

Still puckering his brow into lines of mysterious suggestiveness, the learned Netlips went his way, Roger Buggins gazing after him admiringly.

"That man's reg'lar lost down 'ere"—he observed—"He oughter ha' been in Parliament."

"Ah, so he ought!" agreed Dan Ridley. "Where's there's fog he'd a' made it foggier, and where's there's no understandin' he'd a' made it less understandable. I dare-

say he'd a' bin Prime Minister in no time—he's just the sort. They likes a good old muddler for that work—someone as has the knack o' addlin' the people's brains an' makin' them see a straight line as though 'twere crooked. It keeps things quiet an' yet worrity-like—first up, then down—this way, then that way, an' never nothin' certain, but plenty o' big words rantin' round. That's Netlips all over,—it's in the shape of his 'ed,—he was born like it. I don't like his style myself,—but he'd make a grand cab'nit minister."

"Aye, so he would!" acquiesced Buggins, as he drew the little red curtains across the windows of the tap-room and extinguished the hanging lamp. "Easy rest ye, Dan!"

"Same to you, Mr. Buggins!" responded the tailor cheerfully, as he turned out into the cool sweet dimness of the hawthorn-hedged lane in which the "Mother Huff" stood. "I make bold to say that church or no church, Miss Vancourt's bein' at her own 'ouse 'ull be a gain an' a blessing to the village."

"Mebbe so," returned Buggins laconically,—and closing his door he barred it across for the night, while Dan Ridley, full of the half-poetic, half philosophic thoughts which the subjects of religion and religious worship frequently excite in a more or less untutored rustic mind, trudged slowly homeward.

During these days, Maryllia herself, unconscious of the remarks passed upon her as the lady of the Manor by her village neighbours, had not been idle, nor had she suffered much from depression of spirits, though, socially speaking, she was having what she privately considered in her own mind "rather a dull time." To begin with, everybody in the neighbourhood that was anybody in the neighbourhood, had called upon her,—and the antique oaken table in the

great hall was littered with a snowy array of variously shaped bits of pasteboard, bearing names small and great, —names of old county families,—names of new mushroom gentry,—names of clergymen and their wives in profusion, and one or two modest cards with the plain "Mr." of the only young bachelors anywhere near for fifteen miles round. Nearly every man had a wife—"Such a pity!" commented Maryllia, when noting the fact—"One can never ask any of them to dinner without their dragons!" Most of the callers had paid their "duty visits" at a time of the afternoon when she was always out,—roaming over her own woods and fields, and "taking stock," as she said, of her own possessions,—but on one or two occasions she had been caught "in," and this was the case when Sir Morton Pippitt, accompanied by his daughter Tabitha, Mr. Julian Adderley, and Mr. Marius Longford were announced just at the apt and fitting hour of "five-o'clock tea." Rising from the chair where she had negligently thrown herself to read for a quiet half hour, she set aside her book, and received those important personages with the careless ease and amiable indifference which was a "manner familiar" to her, and which invariably succeeded in making less graceful persons than she feel wretchedly awkward and unhappy about the management of their hands and feet. With a smiling upward and downward glance, she mastered Sir Morton Pippitt's "striking and jovial personality,"—his stiffly-carried upright form, large lower chest, close-shaven red face, and pleasantly clean white hair,—"The very picture of a Bone-Melter"—she thought—"He looks as if he had been boiled all over himself—quite a nice well-washed old man,"—her observant eyes flashed over the attenuated form of Julian Adderley with a sparkle of humour,—she noticed the careful carelessness of his attire,

the artistic "set" of his ruddy locks, the eccentric cut of his trousers, and the, to himself, peculiar knot of his tie. "The poor thing wants to be something out of the common and can't quite manage it," she mentally decided, while she viewed with extreme disfavour the feline elegance affected by Mr. Marius Longford, and the sleek smile, practised by him "for women only," with which he blandly admitted her existence. To Miss Tabitha Pippitt she offered a chair of capacious dimensions, amply provided with large down cushions, inviting her to sit down in it with a gentleness which implied kindly consideration for her years and for the fatigue she might possibly experience as a result of the drive over from Badsworth Hall,—whereat the severe spinster's chronically red nose reddened more visibly, and between her thin lips she sharply enunciated her preference for "a higher seat,—no cushions, thank you!" Thereupon she selected the "higher seat" for herself, in the shape of an old-fashioned music-stool, without back or arm-rest, and sat stiffly upon it like a draper's clothed dummy put up in a window for public inspection. Maryllia smiled,—she knew that kind of woman well;—and paying only the most casual attention to her for the rest of the time, returned to her own place by the open windows and began to dispense the tea, while Sir Morton Pippitt opened conversation by feigning to recall having met her at a Foreign Office reception some two or three years back. He was not altogether in the best of humours, the sight of his recently dismissed butler, Primmins, having upset his nerves. He knew how servants "talked." Who could tell what Primmins might not say *in his* new situation at Abbot's Manor, of his former ex*periences at* Badsworth Hall? And so it was with a some*what heated* countenance that Sir Morton endeavoured to

allude to a former acquaintance with his hostess at a Foreign Office function.

"Oh no, I don't think so," said Maryllia, lazily dropping lumps of sugar into the tea-cups. "Do you take sugar? I ought to ask, I know,—such a number of men have the gout nowadays, and they take saccharine. I haven't any saccharine,—so sorry! You *do* like sugar, Mr. Adderley? How nice of you!" And she smiled. "None for you, Mr. Longford? I thought not. You, Miss Pippitt? No! Everybody else, yes? *That's* all right! The Foreign Office? I think not, Sir Morton,—I gave up going there long ago when I was *quite* young. My aunt, Mrs. Fred Vancourt, always went—you must have met *her* and taken her for me. I always hated a Foreign Office 'crush.' Such big receptions bore one terribly—you never see anybody you really want to know, and the Prime Minister always looks tired to death. His face is a study in several agonies. Two or three years ago? Oh no,—I don't think I was in London at that time. And you were there, were you? Really!"

She handed a cup of tea with a bewitching smile and a "Will you kindly pass it?" to Julian Adderley, who so impetuously accepted the task she imposed upon him of acting as general waiter to the company, that in hastening towards her he caught his foot in the trailing laces of her gown and nearly fell over the tea-tray.

"A thousand pardons!" he murmured, righting himself with an effort. "So clumsy of me!"

"Don't mention it!" said Maryllia, placidly. "Will you hand bread-and-butter to Miss Pippitt. Do you take hot cake, Sir Morton?"

Sir Morton's face had become considerably redder during this interval, and, as he spread his handkerchief

out on one knee to receive the possible dribblings of tea from the cup he had begun to sip at somewhat noisily, he looked as he certainly felt, rather at a loss what next to say. He was not long in this state of indecision however, for a bright idea occurred to him, causing a smile to spread among his loose cheek-wrinkles.

"I'm sorry my friend the Duke of Lumpton has left me," he said with unctuous pomp. "He would have been delighted—er—delighted to call with me to-day——"

"Who is he?" enquired Maryllia, languidly.

Again Sir Morton reddened, but managed to conceal his discomfiture in a fat laugh.

"Well, my dear lady, he is Lumpton!—that is enough for him, and for most people——"

"Really?—Oh—well—of course!—I suppose so!" interrupted Maryllia, with an expressive smile, which caused Miss Tabitha's angular form, perched as it was on the high music-stool, to quiver with spite, and moved Miss Tabitha's neatly gloved fingers to clench like a cat's claws in their kid sheaths with an insane desire to scratch the fair face on which that smile was reflected.

"He is a charming fellow, the Duke—charming—charming!" went on Sir Morton, unconscious of the complex workings of thought in his elderly daughter's acidulated brain. "And his great 'chum,' Lord Mawdenham, has also been staying with us—but they left Badsworth yesterday, I'm sorry to say. They travelled up to London with Lady Elizabeth Messing, who paid us a visit of two or three days——"

"Lady Elizabeth Messing!" echoed Maryllia, with a sudden ripple of laughter. "Dear me! Did you have *her staying* with you? How very nice of you! She is *such a terror!*"

Mr. Marius Longford stroked one of his pussy-cat whiskers thoughtfully, and put in his word.

"Lady Elizabeth spoke of you, Miss Vancourt, several times"—he said—"In fact"—and he smiled—"she had a good deal to say! She remembers meeting you in Paris, and—if I mistake not—also at Homburg on one occasion. She was surprised to hear you were coming to live in this dull country place—she said it would never suit you at all—you were altogether too brilliant—er—"—he bowed—"and er—charming." This complimentary phrase was spoken with the air of a beneficent paterfamilias giving a child a bon-bon.

Maryllia's glance swept over him carelessly.

"Much obliged to her, I'm sure!" she said. "I can quite imagine the anxiety she felt concerning me! So good of her! Is she a great friend of yours?"

Mr. Longford looked slightly disconcerted.

"Well no," he replied, "I have only during these last few days—through Sir Morton—had the pleasure of her acquaintance——"

"Mr. Longford is not a 'society' man!" said Sir Morton, with a chuckle. "He lives on the heights of Parnassus—and looks down with scorn on the browsing sheep in the valleys below! He is a great author."

"Indeed!" and Maryllia raised her delicately arched eyebrows with a faint movement of polite surprise. "But all authors are great nowadays, aren't they? There are no little ones left."

"Oh yes indeed and alas, there are!" exclaimed Julian Adderley, flourishing his emptied tea-cup in the air before setting it back in its saucer and depositing the whole on a table before him. "I am one of them, Miss Vancourt! *Pray be merciful to me!*"

The absurd attitude of appeal he assumed moved Maryllia to a laugh.

"Well, when you look like that I guess I will!" she said playfully, not without a sense of liking for the quaint human creature who so willingly made himself ridiculous without being conscious of it. "What is your line in the small way?"

"Verse!" he replied, with tragic emphasis. "Verse which nobody reads—verse which nobody wants—verse which whenever it struggles into publication, my erudite friend here, Mr. Longford, batters into pulp with a sledge-hammer review of half-a-dozen lines in the heavier magazines. Verse, my dear Miss Vancourt!—verse written to please myself, though its results do not feed myself. But what matter! I am happy! This village of St. Rest, for example, has exercised a spell of enchantment over me. It has soothed my soul. So much so, that I have taken a cottage in a wood—how melodious that sounds!—at the modest rent of a pound a week. That much I can afford,—that much I will risk—and on the air, the water, the nuts, the berries, the fruits, the flowers, I will live like a primæval man, and let the baser world go by!" He ran his fingers through his long hair. "It will be an experience! So new—so fresh!"

Miss Tabitha sniffed sarcastically, and gave a short, hard laugh.

"I hope you'll enjoy yourself!" she said tartly. "But you'll soon tire. I told you at once when you said you had decided to spend the summer in this neighbourhood that you'd regret it. You'll find it very dull."

"Oh, I don't think he will!" murmured Maryllia *graciously.* "He will be writing poetry all the time, you *see! Besides,* with you and Sir Morton as neighbours

how *can* he feel dull? Won't you have some more tea?"

"No thank you!" and Miss Pippitt rose. "Father, we must be going. You have not yet explained to Miss Vancourt the object of our visit."

"True, true!" and Sir Morton got out of his chair with some difficulty. "Time flies fast in such fascinating company!" and he smiled beamingly. "We came, my dear lady, to ask you to dine with us on Thursday next at Badsworth Hall." No words could convey the pomposity which Sir Morton managed to infuse into this simple sentence. To dine at Badsworth was, or ought to be, according to his idea, the utmost height of human bliss and ambition. "We will invite some of our most distinguished neighbours to meet you,—there *are* a few of the old stock left—" this as if he were of the "old stock" himself,—"I knew your father—poor fellow!—and of course I remember seeing you as a child, though you don't remember me—ha-ha!—but I shall be delighted to welcome you under my roof——"

"Thanks so much!" said Maryllia, demurely. "But please let it be for another time, will you? I haven't a single evening disengaged between this and the end of June! So sorry! I'll come over to tea some day, with pleasure! I know Badsworth. Dear old place!—quite famous too, once in the bygone days—almost as famous as Abbot's Manor itself. "Let me see!" and she looked up at the ceiling musingly—"There was a Badsworth who fought against the Commonwealth,—and there was another who was Prime Minister or something of that kind, —then there was a Sir Thomas Badsworth who wrote books—*and another* who did some wonderful service for *King James the First*—yes, and there were some lovely

women in the family too—I suppose their portraits are all there?—Yes—I thought so!"—this as Sir Morton nodded a blandly possessive affirmative. "How things change, don't they? Poor old Badsworth! So funny to think you live there! Oh yes! I'll come over—certainly I'll come over,—some day!"

Thus murmuring polite platitudes Maryllia bade her visitors adieu. Sir Morton conquered an inclination to gasp for breath and say "Damn!" at the young lady's careless refusal of his invitation to dinner,—Miss Tabitha secretly rejoiced.

"I'm sure I don't want her at Badsworth," she said within herself, viciously. "Nasty little insolent conceited thing! I believe her hair is dyed, and her complexion put on. A regular play-actress!"

Unconscious of the spinster's amiable thoughts, Maryllia was holding out a hand to her.

"*Good*-bye!" she said. "So kind of you to come and see me! I'm sure you think I must be lonely here. But I'm not, really! I don't think I ever shall be,—because as soon as I have got the house quite in order, I am going to ask a great many friends to stay with me in turn. They will enjoy seeing the old place, and country air is *such* a boon to London people! Good-bye!"—and here she turned to Marius Longford—"I'm afraid I haven't read any of your books!—anyway I expect they would be too deep for me. Wouldn't they?"

"Lord Roxmouth has been good enough to express his liking for my poor efforts," he replied, with a slight covert smile. "I believe you know him?"

"Oh quite well—quite too well!" said Maryllia, without any discomposure. "But what he likes I always detest. *Unfortunate*, isn't it? So I mustn't even try to read your

works! You, Mr. Adderley,"—and she laughingly looked up at that gentleman who, hat in hand, was pensively drooping in a farewell attitude before her,—"you are going to stop here all summer, aren't you? And in a cottage! How delightful! Anywhere near the Manor?"

"I am not so happy as to have found a domicile on *this* side Eden!" murmured Adderley, with a languishing look. "My humble hut is set some distance apart,—about a mile beyond the rectory."

"Then your best neighbour will be the Parson," said Maryllia, gaily. "So improving to your morals!"

"Possibly—possibly!" assented Adderley. "Mr. Walden is not exactly like other parsons,—there is something wonderfully attractive about him——"

"Something wonderfully conceited and unbearable you mean!" snapped out Sir Morton. "Come, come!—we must be off! The horses are at the door,—can't keep them standing! Miss Vancourt doesn't want to hear anything about the Parson. She'll find him out soon enough for herself. He's an upstart, my dear lady—take my word for it!—a pretentious University prig and upstart! You'll never meet *him* at Badsworth!—ha-ha-ha! Never! Sorry you can't dine on Thursday. Never mind, never mind! Another time! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" and with a slight further exchange of salutations Maryllia found herself relieved of her visitors. Of all the four, Adderley alone looked back with a half-appealing smile, and received an encouraging little nod for his pains—a nod which said "Yes—you can come again if you like!" The wheels of the Pippitt equipage crunched heavily down the drive, and as the grating sound died away, clear on the quiet air came the soft slow chime of the church-bells ringing. It was near sun-

set—and Walden sometimes held a short simple service of evening prayer at that hour. Leaning against the open window Maryllia listened.

"How pretty it is!" she said. "It must be the nearness of the river that makes the tone of the bells so soft and mellow! Oh, what an insufferable old snob that Pippitt is! And what a precious crew of 'friends' he boasts of! Lumpton, who, when he was a few years younger, danced the skirt-dance in women's clothes for forty pounds a night at a New York restaurant!—Mawdenham, who pawned all his mother's jewels to pay his losses at 'Bridge'—and Lady Elizabeth Messing, who is such an abandoned old creature that her own married daughters won't know her! Oh dear! And I believe the Knighted Bone-Boiler thinks they are quite good style! That literary man, Longford, was a most unprepossessing looking object,—a friend of Roxmouth's too, which makes him all the more unpleasant. And of course he will at once write off and say he has seen me. And then—and then—dear me! I wonder where Sir Morton picks these queer people up! He doesn't like the Parson here evidently—'a pretentious University prig and upstart'—what a strong way of putting it!—*very* strong for such a clean-looking old man. 'A pretentious University prig and upstart' are you, Mr. Walden!" Here, smiling to herself, she moved out into the garden and called her dog to her side. "Do you hear that, Plato? Our next-door neighbour is a prig as well as a parson!—isn't it dreadful!" Plato looked up at her with great loving brown eyes and wagged his plumy tail. "I believe he is,—and yet—yet all the same, I think—yes!—I think, as soon as a convenient opportunity presents *itself, I'll ask* him to dinner!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE next day Maryllia was up betimes, and directly after breakfast she sent for Mrs. Spruce. That good lady, moved by the summons into sudden trepidation, lest some duty had been forgotten, or some clause of the household "rules and regulations" left unfulfilled, hastened to the "inner" library, a small octagonal room communicating with the larger apartment, and there found her mistress sitting on a low stool, with her lap full of visiting-cards which she was busily sorting.

"Spruce!" and she looked up from her occupation with a mock tragic air—"I'm dull! Positively D U double L! DULL!"

Mrs. Spruce stared—but merely said:

"Lor, miss!" and folded her hands on her apron, awaiting the next word.

"I'm dull, dull, dull!" repeated Maryllia, springing up and tossing all the cards into a wide wicker basket near at hand. "I don't know what to do with myself, Spruce! I've got nobody to talk to, nobody to play with, nobody to sing to, nobody to amuse me at all, at all! I've seen everything inside and outside the Manor,—I've visited the church,— I know the village—I've talked to dear old Josey Letherbarrow till he must be just tired of me,—he's certainly the cleverest man in the place,—and yesterday the Pippitts came and finished me. I'm done! I throw up the sponge!—that's slang, Spruce! There's nobody to see, nowhere to go, nothing to do. It's awful! 'The time is out of joint O cursëd spite!' That's Hamlet. Something must *happen,* Spruce!"—and here she executed a *playful pas-seul* around the old housekeeper. "There!

Isn't that pretty? Don't look so astonished!—you'll see ever so much worse than that by-and-by! I'm going to have company. I am, really! I shall fill the house! Get all the beds aired, and all the bedrooms swept out. I shall ask heaps of people,—all the baddest, maddest folks I can find! I want to be bad and mad myself. There's nobody bad or mad enough to keep me going down here. Look at these!" And she raked among the visiting-cards and selected a few. "Listen!—'Miss Ittlethwaite, Miss Agnes Ittlethwaite, Miss Barbara Ittlethwaite, Miss Christina Ittlethwaite, Ittlethwaite Park.' It makes my tongue all rough and funny to read their names! They've called,—and I suppose I shall have to call back, but I don't want to. What's the good? I'm *sure* I shall never get on with Ittlethwaites,—we shall never, *never* agree! Do you know them, Spruce? Who *are* they?"

Mrs. Spruce drew a long breath, rolled up her eyes, and began:

"Which the Misses Ittlethwaite is a county fam'ly, miss, livin' some seven or eight miles from here as proud as proud, owin' to their forebears 'avin' sworn death on Magnum Chartus for servin' of King John—an' Miss Ittlethwaite proper, she be gettin' on in years but she's a great huntin' lady, an' come November is allus to be seen follerin' the 'ounds, stickin' to the saddle wonderful for 'er size an' time o' life, an' Miss Barbara, she doos a lot o' sick visitin', an' Bible readin', not *'ere,* for our people won't stand it, an' Passon Walden ain't great on breakin' into private 'ouses without owners' consents for Bible readin', but she, she's 'Igh, an' tramps into Riversford near *every day* which the carrier's cart brings 'er 'ome to 'er *own place* they 'avin' given up a kerridge owin' to spe*kylation in* railways, an' Miss Hagnes she works lovely

with 'er needle, an' makes altar clothes an' vestis for Mr. Francis Anthony, the 'Igh Church clergyman at Riversford, he not bein' married, though myself I should say there worn't no chance for 'er, bein' frightful skinny an' a bit off in 'er looks—an' Miss Christina she do still play at bein' a baby like, she's the youngest, an' over forty, yet quite a giddy in 'er way wearin' ribbins round 'er waist, an' if 'twarn't for 'er cheeks droppin' in long like, she wouldn't look so bad, but they're all *that* proud——"

"That'll do, Spruce, that'll do!" cried Maryllia, putting her hands to her ears. "No more Ittlethwaites, please, for the present! Sufficient for the day is the Magnum Chartus thereof! Who comes here?" and she read from another card,—"'Mrs. Mordaunt Appleby.' Also a smaller label which says 'Mr. Mordaunt Appleby!' More county family pride or what?"

"Oh lor no, miss, Mordaunt Appleby's only the brewer of Riversford,"—said Mrs. Spruce, casually. "He's got the biggest 'ouse in the town, but people remembers 'im when he was a very shabby lot indeed,—an awful shabby lot. *He* ain't nobody, miss—he's just got a bit o' money which makes the commoner sort wag tails for 'im, but it's like his cheek to call *'ere* at all. Sir Morton Pippitt, bein' in the bone-meltin' line, 'as 'im up to dine now an' agin, just to keep in with 'im like, for he's a nasty temper an' his wife's got the longest and spitefullest tongue in all the neighbourhood. But *you* needn't take up wi' them, miss—they ain't in *your* line,—which some brewers is gentlemen, an' Appleby ain't—*your* Pa wouldn't never know *his* Pa."

"Then that's settled!" said Maryllia, with a sigh of relief—"Depart, Mordaunt Applebys into the limbo of *forgotten callers!*"—and she tossed the cards aside—

"Here are the Pippitt names,—I shall remember *them* all right—Pippitt and Ittlethwaite have a tendency to raise blisters of memory on the brain. What is this neat looking little bit of pasteboard—'The Rev. John Walden.' Yes!—*he* called two or three days ago when I was out."

Mrs. Spruce sniffed a sniff of meaning, but said nothing. "I've not been to church yet," went on Maryllia meditatively. "I daresay he thinks me quite a dreadful person. But I hate going to church,—it's so stupid—so boresome—and oh!—such a waste of time!"

Mrs. Spruce still held her peace. Maryllia gave her a little side-glance and noted a certain wistfulness and wonder in the rosy, wrinkled face which was not without its own pathos.

"I suppose everybody about here goes to church at least once on Sundays"—pursued Maryllia—"Don't they?"

"Them as likes Mr. Walden goes"—answered Mrs. Spruce promptly—"Them as don't, stops away. Sir Morton Pippitt used allus to attend 'ere reg'ler when the buildin' was nowt but ruin, an' 'e 'ad a tin roof put over it,—'e was that proud o' the tin roof you'd a' thought 'twas made o' pure gold, an' he was just wild when Mr. Walden pulled it all off an' built up the walls an' roof again as they should be all at 'is own expense, an' he went away from the place for sheer spite like, an' stayed abroad a whole year, an' when 'e come back again 'e never wouldn't go nigh it, an' now 'e attends service at Badsworth Church,—Badsworth Barn *me* calls it,—for 'tain't nowt but a barn which Mr. Leveson keeps 'Igh as 'Igh with a bit o' tinsel an' six candles, though it's the mis-ablest place ye ever set eyes on, an' 'e do look a caution 'isself with what 'e calls a vestiment 'angin' down over 'is back, which is a back as fat as porpuses, the Lord forgive me for sayin' it,

but Sir Morton 'e be that set against Mr. Walden he'll rather say 'is prayers in a pig-stye with a pig for the minister than in *our* church, since it's been all restored an' conskrated—then, as I told you just now, miss, the Ettlethwaites goes to Riversford where they gits opratick music with the 'Lord be merciful to us mis'able sinners' —an' percessions with candles,—so our church is mostly filled wi' the village folks, farmer bodies an' sich-like,— here ain't no grand people what comes, though we don't miss 'em, for Passon 'e don't let us want for nothin' an' when there's a man out o' work, or a woman sick, or a child what's pulin' a bit, an' ricketty, he's allus ready to help, with all 'e 'as an' welcome, payin' doctors' fees often, —an' takin' all the medicine bills on 'isself besides. Ah, he's a rare good sort is Passon Walden, an' so you'd say yerself, miss, if ever you took on your mind to go and hear 'im preach, an' studied 'is ways for a bit as 'twere an' asked 'bout 'im in the village, for 'e's fair an' open as the day an' ain't got no sly sneaky tricks in 'im,—he's just a man, an' a good one—an' that's as rare a thing to find in this world as a di'mond in a wash-tub, an' makin' so bold, miss, if you'd onny go to church next Sunday——"

Maryllia interrupted her by a little gesture.

"I can't, Spruce!" she said, but with great gentleness. "I know it's the right and proper thing for me to do in the country if I wish to stand well with my neighbours,— but I can't! I don't believe in it,—and I won't *pretend* that I believe."

Poor Mrs. Spruce felt a sudden choking in her throat, and her motherly face grew red and pale by turns. Miss Maryllia,—the old Squire's daughter, was—what? A heathen?—an unbeliever—an atheist? Oh surely it was not possible—it could not be!—she would not accept the

idea that a creature so dainty and pretty, so fair and winsome, could be cast adrift on the darkness of life without any trust in the saving grace of the Christian Faith. Limited as were Mrs. Spruce's powers of intelligence, she was conscious enough that there would be something sweet and strong lost out of the world, which nothing could replace, were the message of Christ withdrawn from it. The perplexity of her thoughts was reflected on her countenance and Maryllia, watching her, smiled a little sadly.

"You mustn't think I don't believe in God, Spruce" —she said slowly—"I do. But I can't agree with all the churches teach about Him. They make Him out to be a cruel, jealous and revengeful Being——"

"Mr. Walden don't,—" put in Mrs. Spruce quickly.

"And I like to think of Him as all love and pity and goodness," went on Maryllia, not heeding her, "and I don't say prayers, because I think He knows what is best for me without my asking. Do you understand? So it's really no use my going to church, unless just out of curiosity—and perhaps I will some day do *that,*—I'll see about it! But I must know Mr. Walden a little better first,—I must find out for myself what kind of a man he is, before I make up my mind to endure such a martyrdom as listening to a sermon! I simply loathe sermons. I suppose I must have had too many of them when I was a child. Surely you remember, Spruce, that I used to be taken into Riversford to church?"—Mrs. Spruce nodded emphatically in the affirmative—"Yes!—because when father was alive the church *here* was only a ruin. And I used to go to sleep over the sermons always—and once I fell off my seat and had to be carried out. It was dreadful! Now Uncle *Fred never* went to church,—nor Aunt Emily. So I've *quite got* out of the way of going—nobody is very par-

about it in Paris or London, you see. But perhaps and hear Mr. Walden preach—just once—and I'll u then what I think about it. I'll put his card on ıntelpiece to remind me!" And she suited the action word, Mrs. Spruce gazing at her in a kind of mild ıction. It seemed such a very odd thing to stick lergyman's card as a reminder to go to church "just some Sunday! Meanwhile Maryllia continued,— Spruce, you must begin to be busy! You must e the Manor for the reception of all sorts of people, ınd great. I feel that the time has come for 'com- company!' And in the first place I'm going to send ely Bourne,—she's my pet 'genius'—and I'm paying ıst of her musical education in Paris. She's an —like me,—she's all alone in the world—like me; we're devoted to each other. She's only a child— er fourteen—but she's simply a wonder!—*the* most ful musical wonder in the world!—and she has a ly marvellous voice. Her master Gigue says that she is sixteen she will have emperors at her feet! ors! There are only a few,—but they'll all be grovel- the dust before her! You must prepare some pretty for her, Spruce, those two at the top of the house ok right over the lawn and woods—and make every- ıs cosy as you can. I'll put the finishing touches. must send to London for a grand piano. There's ıe dear old spinet in the drawing-room,—it's sweet ; to, and Cicely will love it,—but she must have a s 'grand' as well. I shall wire to her to-day,—I she'll come at once. She will arrive direct from -let me see!"—and she paused meditatively—"when ? arrive? This is Friday,—yes!—probably she will

arrive here Sunday or Monday morning. So you can get everything ready."

"Very well, miss," and Mrs. Spruce, with the usual regulation "dip" of respectful submission to her mistress was about to withdraw, when Maryllia called her back and handed over to her care the wicker basket full of visiting-cards.

"Put them all by"—she said—"When Cicely comes we'll go through them carefully together, and discuss what to eat, drink and avoid. Till then, I shall blush unseen, wasting my sweetness on the desert air. Time enough and to spare for making the acquaintance of the 'county.' Who was it that said: 'Never know your neighbours?' I forget,—but he was a wise man anyway!"

Mrs. Spruce "dipped" a second time in silence, and was then allowed to depart on her various household duties. The good woman's thoughts were somewhat chaotically jumbled, and most fervently did she long to send for "Passon," her trusted adviser and chief consoler, or else go to him herself and ask him what he thought concerning the non-church-going tendencies of her mistress. Was she altogether a lost sheep? Was there no hope for her entrance into the heavenly fold?

"Which I can't and won't believe she's wicked"—said Mrs. Spruce to herself—"With that sweet childie face an' eyes she couldn't be! M'appen 'tis bad example,—'er 'Merican aunt 'avin no religion as 'twere, an' 'er uncle Mr. Frederick was never no great shakes in 'is young days if all the truth was told. Well, well! The Lord 'E knows 'Is own, an' my 'pinion is He ain't a-goin' to do without Miss Maryllia, for it's allus 'turn again, turn again, why *will 'ee die*' sort of thing with Him, an' He don't give out *in 'Is patience*. I'm glad she's goin' to 'ave a friend to stay

with 'er,—that'll do 'er good and 'earten 'er up—an' mebbe the friend 'll want to go to church, an' Miss Maryllia 'ull go with 'er, an' once they listens to Passon 'twill be all right, for 'is voice do draw you up into a little bit o' heaven somehow, whether ye likes it or not, an' if Miss Maryllia once 'ears 'im, she'll be wantin' to 'ear 'im again —so it's best to leave it all in the Lord's 'ands which makes the hills straight an' the valleys crooked an' knows what's good for both man and beast. Miss Maryllia ain't goin' to miss the Way, the Truth an' the Life—I'm sartin sure o' that."

Thus Mrs. Spruce gravely cogitated, while Maryllia herself, unaware of the manner in which her immortal destinies were being debated by the old housekeeper, put on her hat, and ran gaily across the lawn, her great dog bounding at her side, making for the usual short-cut across the fields to the village. Arrived there she went straight to the post-office, a curious little lop-sided half-timbered cottage with a projecting window, wherein, through the dusty close-latticed panes could be spied various strange edibles, such as jars of acidulated drops, toffee, peppermint balls, and barley-sugar—likewise one or two stray oranges, some musty-looking cakes, a handful or so of old nuts, and slabs of chocolate protruding from shining wrappers of tin-foil,—while a flagrant label of somebody's "Choice Tea" was suspended over the whole collection, like a flag of triumph. The owner of this interesting stock-in-trade and the postmistress of St. Rest, was a quaint-looking little woman, very rosy, very round, very important in her manner, very brisk and bright with her eyes, but very slow with her fingers.

"Which I *gets the* rheumatiz so bad in my joints," she *was wont to say,* "that I often wonders 'ow I knows

postage-stamps from telegram-forms an' register papers from money-orders, an' if you does them things wrong Gove'nment never forgives ye!"

"Ah, *you'll* never get into no trouble with Gove'nment, Missis Tapple," her gossips were wont to assure her, "for you be as ezack as ezack!"

A compliment which Mrs. Tapple accepted without demur, feeling it to be no more than her just due. She was, however, in spite of her "ezack" methods, always a little worried when anything out of the ordinary occurred, and she began to feel slightly flustered directly she saw Maryllia swing open her garden gate. She had already, during the last few days, been at some trouble to decipher various telegrams which the lady of the Manor had sent down by Primmins for immediate despatch, such as one to a certain Lord Roxmouth which had run as follows:—"No time to reply to your letter. In love with pigs and poultry."

"It *is* 'pigs and poultry,' ain't it?" she had asked anxiously of Primmins, after studying the message for a considerable time through her spectacles. And Primmins, gravely studying it too, had replied:—

"It is undoubtedly 'pigs and poultry.'"

"And it *is* 'in love' you think?" pursued Mrs. Tapple, with perplexity furrowing her brow.

"It is certainly 'in love'"—rejoined Primmins, and the faintest suggestion of a wink affected his left eyelid.

Thereupon the telegram was "sent through" to Riversford on its way to London, though not without serious misgivings in Mrs. Tapple's mind as to whether it might not be returned with a "Gove'nment" query as to its correctness. And now, when Maryllia herself entered the office, and said smilingly—"Good morning! Some foreign tele-

ram-forms, please!" Mrs. Tapple felt that the hour was ome when her powers of intelligence were about to be ied to the utmost; and she accordingly began to exerience vague qualms of uneasiness.

"Foreign telegram-forms, miss? Is it for Ameriky?"

"Oh no!—only for Paris,"—and while the old lady mbled nervously in her "official" drawer, Maryllia glanced ound the little business establishment with amused interest. he had a keen eye for small details, and she noticed with umorous appreciation Mrs. Tapple's pink sun-bonnet anging beside the placarded "Post Office Savings Bank" egulations, and a half side of bacon suspended from the eiling, apparently for "curing" purposes, immediately bove the telegraphic apparatus. After a little delay, the equired pale yellow "Foreign and Colonial" forms were ound, and Mrs. Tapple carefully flattened them out, and et them on her narrow office counter.

"Will you have a pencil, or pen and ink, miss?" she nquired.

"Pen and ink, please," replied Maryllia; whereat the ld postmistress breathed a sigh of relief. It would be asier to make out anything at all "strange and uncommon" in pen and ink than in pencil-marks which had a rick of "rubbing." Leaning lightly against the counter Maryllia wrote in a clear bold round hand:

"MISS CICELY BOURNE,
"17, RUE CROISIE, PARIS.

"Come to me at once. Shall want you all summer. Have wired Gigue. Start to-morrow.

"MARYLLIA VANCOURT."

She *pushed this over* to Mrs. Tapple, who thankfully *oting that she was* writing another, took time to care-

fully read and spell over every word, and mastered it all without difficulty. Meanwhile Maryllia prepared her second message thus:

"LOUIS GIGUE,
"CONSERVATOIRE, PARIS.

"Je désire que Cicely passe l'été avec moi et qu'elle arrive immédiatement. Elle peut très bien continuer ses études ici. Vous pouvez suivre, cher maître, à votre plaisir.

"MARYLLIA VANCOURT."

"It's rather long,"—she said thoughtfully, as she finished it,—"but for Gigue it is necessary to explain fully. I hope you can make it out?"

Poor Mrs. Tapple quivered with inward agitation as she took the terrible telegram in hand, and made a brave effort to rise to the occasion.

"Yes, miss,—" she stammered—"Louis Gigue—G. i. g. u. e. that's right—yes—at the Conservatory, Paris——"

"No, no!" said Maryllia, with a little laugh. "Not Conservatory—Conservatoire—*toire,* t. o. i. r. e. the place where they study music."

"Oh yes—I see!" and Mrs. Tapple tried to smile knowingly, as she fixed her spectacles more firmly on her nose, and began to murmur slowly—"Je désire, d. e. sire—oh yes—desire!—que—q. u. e.—Cicely—yes that's all right!—passe, an e to pass—yes—now let me wait a minute—one minute, miss, if you please!—l'été—l apostrophe e, stroke across the e,—t, and e, stroke across the e——"

Maryllia's eyebrows went up in pretty perplexity.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid you won't be able to get it right *that way!*"—she said—"I had better write it in English, ...—why, here's Mr. Walden!" This, as she saw

he clergyman's tall athletic figure entering Mrs. Tapple's iny garden,—"Good morning, Mr. Walden!" and as he raised his hat, she smiled graciously—"I'm trying to send off a French telegram, and I'm afraid it's rather difficult——"

A glance at Mrs. Tapple explained the rest, and Walden's eyes twinkled mirthfully.

"Perhaps *I* can be of some use, Miss Vancourt,"—he said—"Shall I try?"

Maryllia nodded, and Walden walked into the little office.

"Let me send off those telegrams for you, Mrs. Tapple," —he said—"You know you often allow me to amuse myself in that way!—I haven't touched the instrument for a month at least, and am getting quite out of practice. May I come in?"

Mrs. Tapple's face shone with relief and gladness.

"Well now, Mr. Walden, if it isn't a real blessin' that you happened to look in this mornin'!" she exclaimed. "For now there won't be no delay,—not but what I knew a bit o' French as a gel, an' I'd 'ave made my way to spell it out somehow no matter how slow,—but there! you're that handy that 'twon't take no time, an' Miss Vancourt will be sure of her message 'avin' gone straight off from here correct,—an' if they makes mistakes at Riversford, 'twon't be my fault."

While she thus ran on, Walden was handling the telegraphic apparatus. His back was turned to Maryllia, but he felt her eyes upon him,—as indeed they were,—and there was a slight flush of colour in his bronzed cheeks as he presently looked round and said:

"*May I have the* telegram?"

"*There are two*—both for Paris,"—replied Maryllia.

handing him the filled-up forms. "One is quite easy—in English."

"And the other quite difficult—in French!"—he laughed. "Let me try if I can make it out correctly." Thereupon he read aloud: "'Louis Gigue, Conservatoire, Paris. Je désire que Cicely passe l'été avec moi et qu'elle arrive immédiatement. Elle peut très bien continuer ses études ici. Vous pouvez suivre, cher maître, à votre plaisir.' Is that right?"

Maryllia's eyes opened a little more widely,—like blue flowers wakening to the sun. This country clergyman's pronunciation of French was perfect,—more perfect than her own trained Parisian accent. Mrs. Tapple clasped her dumpy red hands in a silent ecstasy of admiration. "Passon" knew everything!

"Is it right?" Walden repeated. Maryllia gave a little start.

"Oh I beg your pardon! Yes—quite right!—thank you ever so much!"

Click-click-click-click! The telegraphic apparatus was at work, and the unofficial operator was entirely engrossed in his business. Mrs. Tapple stood respectfully dumb and motionless, watching him. Maryllia, leaning against the ledge of the office counter, watched him too. She took quiet observation of the well-poised head, covered with its rich brown-grey waving locks of hair,—the broad shoulders, the white firm muscular hands that worked the telegraphic instrument, and she was conscious of the impression of authority, order, knowledge and self-possession which seemed to have come into the little office with him, and to have created quite a new atmosphere. Outside, in the small garden, among mignonette and early flowering sweet-peas, Plato sat on his huge haunches in lion-like dignity,

blinking at the sun,—while Walden's terrier, Nebbie, executed absurd but entirely friendly gambols in front of him, now pouncing down on two forepaws with nose to ground and eyes leering sideways,—now wagging an excited tail with excessive violence to demonstrate goodwill and a desire for amity,—and anon giving a short yelp of suppressed feeling,—to all of which conciliatory approaches Plato gave no other response than a vast yawn and meditative stare. The monotonous click-click-click continued,—now stopping for a second, then going on more rapidly again, till Maryllia began to feel quite unreasonably impatient. She found something irritating at last in the contemplation of the back of Walden's cranium,—it was too well-shaped, she decided,—she could discover no fault in it. Humming a tune carelessly under her breath, she turned towards Mrs. Tapple's small grocery department, and feigned to be absorbed in an admiring survey of peppermint balls and toffee. Certain glistering squares of sticky white substance on a corner shelf commended themselves to her notice as specimens of stale "nougât," wherein the almonds represented a remote antiquity,—and a mass of stringy yellow matter laid out in lumps on blue paper and marked "One Penny per ounce" claimed attention as a certain "hardbake" peculiar to St. Rest, which was best eaten in a highly glutinous condition. A dozen or so of wrinkled apples which, to judge by their damaged and worn exteriors, must have been several autumns old, kept melancholy companionship with assorted packages of the "Choice Tea" whereof the label was displayed in the window, and Maryllia was just about wondering whether she would or could buy anything out of the musty-fusty collection, when the click-click-click stopped abruptly, and Walden stepped *forth from the interior* "den" of the post-office.

"That's all right, Miss Vancourt," he said. "Your telegrams are sent correctly as far as Riversford anyhow, and there is one operator there who is acquainted with the French language. Whether they will transmit correctly from London I shouldn't like to say!—we are a singular nation, and one of our singularities is that we scorn to know the language of our nearest neighbours!"

She smiled up at him,—and as his glance met hers he was taken aback, as it were, by the pellucid beauty and frank innocence of the grave dark-blue eyes that shone so serenely into his own.

"Thank you so very, very much! You have been most kind!" and with a swift droop of her white eyelids she veiled those seductive "mirrors of the soul" beneath a concealing fringe of long golden-brown lashes. "It's quite a new experience to find a clergyman able and willing to be a telegraph clerk as well! So useful, isn't it?"

"In a village like this it is"—rejoined Walden, gaily —"And after all, there's not much use in being a minister unless one can practically succeed in the art of 'ministering' to every sort of demand made upon one's capabilities. Even to Miss Vancourt's needs should she require anything, from the preservation of trees to the sending of telegrams, that St. Rest can provide!"

Again Maryllia glanced at him, and again a little smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

"I must pay for the telegrams"—she said abruptly— "Mrs. Tapple——"

"Yes, miss—I've written it all down," murmured Mrs. Tapple nervously. "It's right, Mr. Walden, isn't it? If you would be so good as to look at it, bein' tuppence a word, *it do make* it different like, an' m'appen there might be a *mistake*——"

Walden glanced over the scrap of paper on which she had scrawled her rough figures.

"Fivepence out, I declare, Mrs. Tapple!" he said merrily. "Dear dear! Whatever is going to become of you, eh? To cheat yourself wouldn't matter—nobody minds *that,*—but to do the British Government out of fivepence would be a dreadful thing! Now if I had not seen this you would have been what is called 'short' this evening in making up accounts." Here he handed the corrected paper to Maryllia. "I think you will find that right."

Maryllia opened her purse and paid the amount,—and Mrs. Tapple, in giving her change for a sovereign, included among the coins a bright new threepenny piece with a hole in it. Spying this little bit of silver, Maryllia held it up in front of Walden's eyes triumphantly.

"Luck!" she exclaimed. "That's for you! It's a reward for your telegraphic operations! Will you be grateful if I give it to you?"

He laughed.

"Profoundly! It shall be my D. S. O.!"

"Then there you are!" and she placed the tiny coin in the palm of the hand he held out to receive it. "The labourer is worthy of his hire! Now you can never go round St. Rest grumbling and saying you work for no pay!" Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "What shall we do next? Oh, I know! Let's buy some acid drops!"

Mrs. Tapple stared and smiled.

"Or pear-drops," continued Maryllia, glancing critically at the various jars of "sweeties"—"I see the real old-fashioned pink ones up there,—lumpy at one end and tapering at the other. Do you like them? Or brandy balls? I think the pear-drops carry one back to the age *of ten most quickly!* But which do *you* prefer?"

Walden tried to look serious, but could not succeed. Laughter twinkled all over his face, and he began to feel extremely young.

"Well,—really, Miss Vancourt,—" he began.

"There, I know what you are going to say!" exclaimed Maryllia. "You are going to tell me that it would never do for a clergyman to be seen munching pear-drops in his own parish. *I* understand! But clergymen do ever so much worse than that sometimes. They do, really! Two ounces of pear-drops for me, Mrs. Tapple, please!—and one of brandy balls!"

Mrs. Tapple bustled out of her "Gove'nment" office, and came to the grocery counter to dispense these dainties.

"They stick to the jar so"—said Maryllia, watching her thoughtfully—"They always did. I remember, as a child, seeing a man put his finger in to detach them. Don't put *your* finger in, Mrs. Tapple!—take a bit of wood—an old skewer or something. Oh, they're coming out all right! That's it!" And she popped one of the pear-drops into her mouth. "They are really very good—better than French *fondants*—so much more innocent and refreshing!" Here she took possession of the little paper-bags which Mrs. Tapple had filled with the sweets. "Thank you, Mrs Tapple! If any answers to my telegrams come from Paris, please send them up to the Manor at once. Good morning!"

"Good morning, miss!" And Mrs. Tapple, curtseying, pulled the door of her double establishment wider open to let the young lady pass out, which she did, with a smile and nod, Walden following her. Plato rose and *paced majestically* after his mistress, Nebbie trotting meekly *at the rear*, and so they all went forth from the post-

mistress's garden into the road, where Walden pausing, raised his hat in farewell.

"Oh, are you going?" queried Maryllia. "Won't you walk with me as far as your own rectory?"

"Certainly, if you wish it,"—he answered, with a slight touch of embarrassment—"I thought perhaps——"

"You thought perhaps what?" laughed Maryllia, glancing up at him archly. "That I was going to make you eat pear-drops against your will? Not I! I wouldn't be so rude. But I really thought I ought to buy something from Mrs. Tapple,—she was so worried, poor old dear!—till you came in. Then she looked as happy as though she saw a vision of angels. She's a perfect picture, with her funny old shawl and spectacles and knobbly red fingers—and do you know, all the time you were working the telegraph you were under the fragrant shadow of a big piece of bacon which was 'curing,'—positively 'curing' over your head! Couldn't you smell it?"

Walden's eyes twinkled.

"There was certainly a fine aroma in the air," he said. "But it seemed to me no more than the customary perfume common to Mrs. Tapple's surroundings. I daresay it was new to *you!* A country clergyman is perhaps the only human being who has to inure himself to bacon odours as the prevailing sweetness of cottage interiors."

Maryllia laughed. She had a pretty laugh, silver-clear and joyous without loudness.

"Fancy you being so clever as to be able to send off telegrams!" she exclaimed. "What an accomplishment for a Churchman! Don't you want to know all about the messages you sent?—who the persons are and what I have to do with them?"

"Not in the least!" answered John, smiling.

"Are you not of a curious disposition?"

"I never care about other people's business," he said, meeting her upturned eyes with friendly frankness. "I have enough to do to attend to my own."

"Then you are positively inhuman!" declared Maryllia. "And absolutely unnatural! You are, really! Every two-legged creature on earth wants to find out all the ins and outs of every other two-legged creature,—for if this were not the case wars would be at an end, and the wicked cease from troubling and the weary be at rest. So just because you *don't* want to know about my two friends in Paris, I'm going to tell you. Louis Gigue is the greatest teacher of singing there is,—and Cicely Bourne is his pupil, a perfectly wonderful little girl with a marvellous compass of voice, whose training and education I am paying for. I want her with me here—and I have sent for her;—Gigue can come on if he thinks it necessary to give her a few lessons during the summer, but of course she is not to sing in public till she is sixteen. She is only fourteen now."

Walden listened in silence. He was looking at his companion sideways, and noting the delicate ebb and flow of the rose tint in her cheeks, the bright flecks of gold in the otherwise red-brown hair, and the light poise of her dainty rounded figure as she stepped along beside him with an almost ærial grace and swiftness.

"She was the child of a Cornish labourer," went on Maryllia. "Her mother sold her for ten pounds. Yes! —wasn't it dreadful?" This, as John's face expressed surprise—"But it is true! You shall hear all the story some day,—it is quite a little romance. And she is so *clever!*—you would think her ever so much older than she is to hear her talk. Sometimes she is rather blunt,

and people get offended with her—but she is true—oh, *so* true!—she wouldn't do a mean action for the world! She is just devoted to me,—and that is perhaps why I am devoted to her,—because after all, it's a great thing to be loved, isn't it?"

"It is indeed!" replied John, mechanically, beginning to feel a little dazed under the influence of the bright eyes, animated face, smiling lips and clear sweet voice. "It ought to be the best of all things."

"It ought to be, and it is!" declared Maryllia emphatically. "Oh what a lovely bush of lilac!" And she hastened on a few steps in order to look more closely at the admired blossoms which were swaying in the light breeze over the top of a thick green hedge. "Why, it must be growing in your garden! Yes, it is!—of course it is!—this is your gate. May I come in?"

She paused, her hand on the latch,—and for a moment Walden hesitated. A wave of colour swept up to his brows,—he was conscious of a struggling desire to refuse her request, united to a still more earnest craving to grant it. She looked at him, wistfully smiling.

"May I come in?" she repeated.

He advanced, and opened the gate, standing aside for her to pass.

"Of course you may"—he said gently—"And welcome!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Now it happened that Bainton was at that moment engaged in training some long branches of honeysuckle across the rectory walls, and being half-way up a ladder for the purpose, the surprise he experienced at seeing

"Passon" and Miss Vancourt enter the garden together and walk slowly side by side across the lawn, was so excessive, that in jerking his head round to convince himself that it was not a vision but a reality, he nearly lost his balance.

"Woa, steady!" he muttered, addressing the ladder which for a second swayed beneath him. "Woa, I sez! This ain't no billowy ocean with wot they calls an underground swell! So the ice 'ave broke, 'ave it! She wot don't like clergymen, an' he wot don't like ladies 'as both come to saunterin' peaceful like with one another over the blessed green grass all on a fine May mornin'! Which it's gettin' nigh on June now an' no sign o' the weather losin' temper. Well, well! Wonders won't never cease it's true, but I'd as soon a' thought o' my old 'ooman dancin' a 'ornpipe among her cream cheeses as that Passon Walden would a' let Miss Vancourt inside this 'ere gate so easy like, an' he a bacheldor. But there!—arter all he's gettin' on in years, an' she's ever so much younger than he is, an' I dessay he's made up his mind to treat 'er kind like as 'twere her father, which he should do bein' spiritooal 'ead o' the village, an' as for the pretty face of 'er, he's not the man to look at it more'n once, an' then he couldn't tell you wot it's like. He favours his water-lilies mor'n females,—ah! an' I bet he'd give ten pound for a new specimen of a flower when he wouldn't lay out a 'apenny on a new specimen of a woman." Here, pausing in his reflections, he again looked cautiously round from his high vantage point of view on the ladder, and saw Walden break off a spray of white lilac from one bush of a very special kind near the edge of the *lawn, and* give it to Miss Vancourt. "Well, now that do *beat me* altogether!" he ejaculated under his breath.

"'If he's told me once, he's told me a 'undred times that he won't 'ave no blossoms broke off that bush on no account. An' there he is a-pickin' of it hisself! That's a kind of thing which do make me feel that men is a poor feeble-minded lot—it do reely now!"

But feeble-minded or not, John had nevertheless gathered the choice flower, and moreover had found a certain pleasure in giving it to his fair companion, who inhaled its delicious odour with an appreciative smile.

"What a dear old house you have!" she said, glancing up at the crossed timbers, projecting gables, and quaint dormer windows set like eyes in the roof. "I had no idea that it was so pretty! And the garden is perfectly lovely. It is so *very* artistic!—it looks like a woman's dream of a garden rather than a man's."

John smiled.

"You think women more artistic than men?" he queried.

"In the decorative line—yes," she replied, "especially where flowers are concerned. If one leaves the planning of a garden entirely to a man, he is sure to make it too stiff and mathematical,—he will not allow Nature to have her own way in the least little bit,—in fact"—and she laughed—"I don't think men as a rule like to let anything or anybody have their own way except themselves!"

The smile still lingered kindly round the corners of Walden's mouth.

"Possibly you may be right"—he said—"I almostbelieve you are. Men *are* selfish,—much more selfish than women. Nature made them so in the first instance,—and our methods of education and training all tend to intensify our natural *bent. But"*—here he paused and looked at *her thoughtfully—"I* am not sure that absolute unselfish-

ness would be a wise or strong trait in the character of a man. You see the first thing he has to do in this world is to earn the right to live,—and if he were always backing politely out of everybody else's way, and allowing himself to be hustled on one side in an unselfish desire to let others get to the front, he would scarcely be able to hold his own in any profession. And all those dependent upon his efforts would also suffer,—so that his 'unselfishness' might become the very worst kind of selfishness in the end—don't you think so?"

"Well—yes—perhaps in that way it might—" hesitated Maryllia, with a faint blush—"I ought not to judge anyone, I know—but—oh dear!—the men one meets in town—the society men with their insufferable airs of conceit and condescension,—their dullness of intellect,—their preference for cigars, whiskey and 'Bridge' to anything else under the sun,—their intensely absorbed love of personal ease, and their perfectly absurd confidence in their own supreme wisdom!—these are the hybrid creatures that make one doubt the worth of the rest of their sex altogether."

"But there are hybrid creatures on both sides"—said Walden quietly—"Just as there are the men you speak of, so there are women of the same useless and insufferable character. Is it not so?"

She looked up at him and laughed.

"Why yes, of course!" she frankly admitted. "I guess I won't argue with you on the six of one and half-dozen of the other! But it's just as natural for women to criticise men as for men to criticise women nowadays. Long *ago, in the* lovely 'once upon a time' fairy period, the *habit of* criticism doesn't appear to have developed *strongly in* either sex. The men were chivalrous and

tender,—the women adoring and devoted—I think it must have been perfectly charming to have lived then! It is all so different now!"

"Fortunately, it is!" said John, with a mirthful sparkle in his eyes. "I am sure you would not have liked that 'once upon a time fairy period' as you call it, at all, Miss Vancourt! Poets and romancists may tell us that the men were 'chivalrous and tender,' but plain fact convinces us that they were very rough unwashen tyrants who used to shut up their ladies in gloomy castles where very little light and air could penetrate, and the adoring and devoted ladies, in their turn, made very short work of the whole business by either dying of their own grief and ill-treatment, or else getting killed in cold blood by order of their lords and masters. Why, one of the finest proofs of an improvement in our civilisation is the freedom of thought and action given to women in the present day. Personally speaking, I admit to a great fondness for old-fashioned ways, and particularly for old-fashioned manners,—but I cannot shut my mind to the fact that for centuries women have been unfairly hindered by men in every possible way from all chance of developing the great powers of intelligence they possess,—and it is certainly time the opposition to their advancement should cease. Of course, being a man myself"—and he smiled—"I daresay that in my heart of hearts I like the type of woman I first learned to know and love best,—my mother. She had the 'early Victorian' ways,—they were very simple, but also very sweet."

He broke off, and for a moment or two they paced the lawn in silence.

"I suppose you live all alone here?" asked Maryllia, *suddenly.*

"Yes. Quite alone."

"And are you happy?"

"I am content."

"I understand!" and she looked at him somewhat earnestly. "'Happy' is a word that should seldom be used I think. It is only at the rarest possible moments that one can feel real true happiness."

"You are too young to say that"—he rejoined gently —"All your life is before you. The greater part of mine lies behind me."

Again she glanced at him somewhat timidly.

"Mr. Walden"—she began—"I'm afraid—I suppose —I daresay you think——"

John caught the appealing flash of the blue eyes, and wondered what she was going to say. She played with the spray of lilac he had given her, and for a moment seemed to have lost her self-possession.

"I am quite sure,"—she went on hurriedly—"that you—I mean, I'm afraid you haven't a very good opinion of me because I don't go to church—"

He looked at her, smiling a little.

"Don't you go to church?" he asked. "I didn't know it!"

Here was a surprise for the lady of the Manor. The clergyman of her own parish,—a man, who by all accepted rule and precedent ought to have been after her at once, asking for subscriptions to this fund and that fund, toadying her for her position, and begging for her name and support, had not even noticed her absence from divine service on Sundays! She did not know whether to be *relieved* or dissatisfied. Such indifference to her actions *piqued her* feminine pride,—and yet his tone was very

kind and courteous. Noting the colour coming and going on her face, he spoke again—

"I never interfere personally with my parishioners, Miss Vancourt"—he said—"To attend church or stay away from church is a matter of conscience with each individual, and must be left to individual choice. I should be the last person in the world to entertain a bad opinion of anyone simply because he or she never went to church. That would be foolish indeed. Some of the noblest and best men in Christendom to-day never go to church,—but they are none the less noble and good. They have their reasons of conscience for non-committing themselves to accepted forms of faith, and it often turns out that they are more truly Christian and more purely religious than the most constant church-goer that ever lived."

Maryllia gave a little sigh of sudden relief.

"Ah, you are a broad-minded Churchman!" she said. "I am glad!—Very glad! Because you have no doubt followed the trend of modern thought,—and you must have read all the discussions in the magazines and in the books that are written on such subjects,—and you can understand how difficult it is to a person like myself to decide what is right when so many of the wisest and most educated men agree to differ."

Walden stopped abruptly in his walk.

"Please do not mistake me, Miss Vancourt," he said gravely and with emphasis. "I should be sorry if you gathered a wrong opinion of me at the outset of our acquaintance. As your minister I feel that I ought to make my position clear to you. You say that I have probably followed the trend of modern thought—and I presume that you mean the trend of modern thought in religious matters. Now *I have not 'followed'* it, but I have patiently studied

it, and find it in all respects deplorable and disastrous. At the same time I would not force the high truths of religion on any person, nor would I step out of my way to ask anyone to attend church if he or she did not feel inclined to do so. And why? Because I fully admit the laxity and coldness of the Church in the present day—and I know that there are many ministers of the Gospel who do not attract so much as they repel, and I am not so self-opinionated as to dream that I, a mere country parson, can succeed in drawing souls to Christ when so many men of my order, more gifted than I, have failed, and continue to fail. But I wish you quite frankly to understand that the trend of modern thought does not affect the vows I took at my ordination,—that I do not preach one thing and think another,—and that whatever my faults and shortcomings may be, I most earnestly endeavour to impress the minds of all those men and women who are committed to my care with the beauty, truth and saving grace of the Christian Faith."

Maryllia was silent. She appeared to be looking at the daisies in the grass.

"I hope," he continued quietly, "you will forgive this rather serious talk of mine. But when you spoke of 'the trend of modern thought,' it seemed necessary to me to let you know at once and straightly that I am not with it,—that I do not belong to the modern school. Professing to be a Christian minister, I try to be one,—very poorly and unsuccessfully I know,—but still, I try!"

Maryllia raised her eyes. There was a glisten on her long lashes as of tears.

"*Please* forgive *me!*" she said simply. "And thank *you for* speaking as you have done. I shall always re-

member it, and honour you for it. I hope we shall be friends?"

She put the words as a query, and half timidly held out her little ungloved hand. He took it at once and pressed it cordially.

"Indeed, I am sure we shall!" he said heartily, and the smile that made his face more than ordinarily handsome lit up his eyes and showed a depth of sincerity and kindly feeling reflected straight from his honest soul. A sudden blush swept over Maryllia's cheeks, and she gently withdrew her hand from his clasp. A silence fell between them, and when they broke the spell it was by a casual comment respecting the wealth of apple-blossoms that were making the trees around them white with their floral snow.

"St. Rest is a veritable orchard, when the season favours it"—said Walden—"It is one of the best fruit-growing corners in England. At Abbot's Manor, for instance, the cherry crop is finer than can be gathered on the same acreage of ground in Kent. Did you know that?"

Maryllia laughed.

"No!—I know absolutely nothing about my own home, Mr. Walden,—and I am perfectly aware that I ought to be ashamed of my ignorance. I *am* ashamed of it! I'm going to try and amend the error of my ways as fast as I can. When Cicely Bourne comes to stay with me, she will help me. She's ever so much more sensible than I am. She's a genius."

"Geniuses do not always get the credit of being sensible, do they?" queried John, smiling. "Are they not supposed to be creatures of impulse, dwellers in the air, and wholly irresponsible?"

"Exactly so"—she replied—"That is the commonplace

opinion commonplace people entertain of them,—and yet the commonplace people owe everything they enjoy in art, literature and science to the conceptions of genius, and of genius alone. As for Cicely, she is the most practical little person possible. She began to earn her living at the age of eleven, and has 'roughed' it in the world more severely than many a man. But she keeps her dreams."

"And those who wish her well will pray that she may always keep them"—said Walden—"For to lose one's illusions is to lose the world."

"The world itself may be an illusion!" said Maryllia, drawing near the garden gate and leaning upon it for a moment, as she glanced up at him with a vague sadness in her eyes,—"We never know. I have often felt that it is only a pretty little pageant, with a very dark background behind it."

He was silent, looking at her. For the first time he caught himself noticing her dress. It was of simple pale blue linen, relieved with white embroidered lawn, and in its cool, fresh, clean appearance was in keeping with the clear bright day. A plain straw garden hat tied across the crown and under the chin with a strip of soft blue ribbon to match the linen gown, was the finish to this "fashionable" young woman's toilette,—and though it was infinitely becoming to the fair skin, azure eyes, and gold-brown hair of its wearer, it did not suggest undue extravagance, or a Paris "mode." And while he yet almost unconsciously studied the picture she made, resting one arm lightly across his garden gate, she lifted the latch suddenly and swung it open.

"*Good-bye!*" and she nodded smilingly. "Thank you *so much for* letting me see your lovely garden. As soon

as Cicely arrives, you must come and see her—you will, won't you?"

"I shall be most happy——" he murmured.

"She will be so interested to hear how you sent her my telegram"—continued Maryllia—"And Gigue too—poor old Gigue!—he is certain to come over here some time during the summer. He is such a quaint person! You will like him immensely! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye—for the present!" said John with a slight note of appeal in his voice, which was not lost wholly upon the air alone, for Maryllia turned her head back towards him with a laugh.

"Oh, of course!—only for the present! We are really next-door neighbours, and I'm afraid we can't escape each other unless we each play hermit in separate caves! But I promise not to bore you with my presence *very* often!"

She waved the spray of white lilac he had given her in farewell, and calling her dog to her side, passed down the village road lightly, like a blue flower drifting with the May breeze, and was soon out of sight.

Walden closed the gate after her with careful slowness, and returned across the lawn to his favourite seat under his favourite apple-tree. Nebbie followed him, disconsolately snuffing the ground in the trail of the departed Plato, who doubtless, to the smaller animal's mind, represented a sort of canine monarch who ruthlessly disdained the well-meaning attentions of his inferiors. Bainton, having finished his task of training the vines across the walls of the rectory, descended his ladder, making as much noise as he could about it and adding thereto a sudden troublesome cough which would, he considered, probably excite his master's sympathy and instant attention. But *Walden paid no heed.* He was apparently busy fumbling

with his watch-chain. Bainton waited a moment, and then, unable any longer to control his curiosity, seized his ladder and deliberately carried it across the lawn, though he knew that that was not the proper way to the tool-shed where it was kept. Halting close to the seat under the apple-tree, he said:—

"Yon red honeysuckle's comin' on fine, Passon,—it be as full o' bud as a pod o' peas."

"Aye indeed!"—murmured Walden, absently. "That's all right!"

Bainton paused expectantly. No further word however was vouchsafed to him, and he knew by experience that such silence implied his master's wish to be left alone. With an almost magisterial gravity he surveyed the Reverend John's bent head, and with another scrutinising glance, ascertained the nature of the occupation on which his fingers were engaged, whereupon his face expressed the liveliest amazement. Shouldering his ladder, he went his way,—and once out of earshot gave vent to a long low whistle.

"It do beat me!" he said, slapping one corduroy-trousered leg vehemently. "It do beat me altogether—it do reely now! I ain't no swearin' sort, an' bad langwidge ain't my failin', but I feel like takin' a bet, or sayin' a swear when I sees a sensible man like, makin' a fool of hisself! If Passon ain't gone looney all on a suddint, blest if I knows wot's come to 'im. 'Tain't Miss Vancourt,—'tain't no one nor nothink wot I knows on, but I'm blowed if he worn't sittin' under that tree, like a great gaby, a' fastenin' a mis'able threepenny bit to 'is watch-*chain! Did* anyone ever 'ear the like! A threepenny bit *with a 'ole in it!* To think of a man like that turnin' to

the sup'stitions o' maids an' wearin' a 'oly bit o' silver! It do make me wild!—it do reely now!"

And snorting with ineffable disdain, Bainton almost threw his ladder into the tool-shed, thereby scaring a couple of doves who had found their way within, and who now flew out with a whirr of white wings that glistened like pearl in the sunlight as they spread upwards and away into the sky.

"A threepenny bit with a 'ole in it!" he repeated, mechanically watching the birds of peace in their flight. "An' on his watch-chain too, along wi' the gold cross wot he allus wears there, an' which folks sez was the last thing wore by 'is dead sister! Somethin's gone wrong with 'im —somethin' *must* a' gone wrong! Ginerally speakin' a 'oly bit means a woman in it—but 'tain't that way wi' Passon for sure—there's a deeper 'ole than the 'ole in the three-penny—a 'ole wot ain't got no bottom to it, so fur as I can see. I'm just fair 'mazed with that 'ole!—'mazed an' moithered altogether, blest if I ain't!"

The Reverend John, meanwhile, seated under his canopy of apple-blossoms, had succeeded in attaching the "'oly bit" to his chain in such a manner that it should not come unduly into notice with the mere action of pulling out his watch. He could not, for the life of him, have explained, had he been asked, the reason why he had determined to thus privately wear it on his own person. To himself he said he "fancied" it. And why should not parsons have "fancies" like other people? Why should they not wear "'oly bits" if they liked? No objection, either moral, legal or religious, could surely be raised to such a course of procedure! And John actually whistled a tune as he slipped back his chain with its new adornment attached, into his waistcoat pocket, and surveyed his

garden surroundings with a placid smile. His interview with Miss Vancourt had not been an unpleasant experience by any means. He liked her better than when he had first seen her on the morning of their meeting under the boughs of the threatened "Five Sister" beeches. He could now, as he thought, gauge her character and temperament correctly, with all the wonderful perspicuity and not-to-be-contradicted logic of a man. She was charming,—and she knew her charm,—she was graceful, and she was aware of her grace,—she was bright and intelligent in the prettily "surface" way of women,—she evidently possessed a kind heart, and she seemed thoughtful of other people's feelings,—she had a sweet voice and a delightfully musical laugh,—and—and—that was about all. It was not much, strictly speaking;—yet he found himself considerably interested in weighing the pros and cons of her nature, and wondering how she had managed to retain, in the worldly and social surroundings to which she had been so long accustomed, the child-like impulsiveness of her manner, and the simple frankness of her speech.

"Of course it may be all put on,"—he reflected, though with a touch of shamed compunction at the bare suggestion—"One can never tell! It *seemed* natural. And it would hardly be worth her while to act a part for the benefit of an old fogey like myself. I *think* she is genuine. I hope so. At any rate I will believe she is, till she proves herself otherwise. Of course 'the trend of modern thought' has touched her. The cruellest among the countless cruel deeds of latter-day atheism is to murder the Christ in women. For, as woman's purity first brought the Divine Master into the world, so must woman's purity still keep *Him here* with us,—else we men are lost—lost through *the sins, not* only of our fathers, but chiefly of our mothers!"

That same evening Maryllia received a prompt reply to one of the telegrams which Walden had sent off for her in the morning. It was brief and to the point, and only ran:—"Coming. Cicely;"—a message which Mrs. Tapple had no difficulty in deciphering, and which she sent up to the Manor, post haste, as soon as it arrived. The telegraph-boy who conveyed it, got sixpence for himself as a reward for the extra speed he had put on in running all the way from the village to the house, thereby outstripping the postman, who being rotund in figure was somewhat heavily labouring up in the same direction with the last delivery of letters for the day. Miss Vancourt's correspondents were generally very numerous,—but on this occasion there was only one letter for her,—one, neatly addressed, with a small finely engraved crest on the flap of the envelope. Maryllia surveyed that envelope and crest with disfavour,—she had seen too many of the same kind. The smile that brightened her face when she read Cicely's telegram, faded altogether into an expression of cold weariness as with a small silver paper-knife she slowly slit the closed edges of the unwelcome missive and glanced indifferently at its contents. It ran as follows:

"My dear Miss Maryllia,—I feel sure you do not realise the great pain you are inflicting on your aunt, as well as on myself, by declining to answer our letters except by telegram. Pray remember that we are quite in the dark as to the state of your health, your surroundings and your general well-being. Your sudden departure from town was, if you will permit me to say so, a most unwise impulse, causing as it has done, the greatest perplexity in your own social circle and among your hosts of friends. *I have done my best to* smoothe matters over, by assuring

all enquirers that certain matters on your country estate required your personal supervision, but rumour, as you know, has many tongues which are not likely to be easily silenced. Your aunt was much surprised and disturbed to receive from you a box of peacock's feathers, without any word from yourself. She has no doubt you meant the gift kindly, but was not the manner of giving somewhat strange?—let me say eccentric? I hope you will allow me to point out to you that nothing is more fatal to a woman in good society than to attain any sort of reputation for eccentricity. I may take the liberty of saying this to you as an old friend, and as one who still holds persistently to the dear expectation, despite much discouragement, of being able soon to call you by a closer name than mere friendship allows. The disagreement between your aunt and yourself should surely be a matter of slight duration, and not sufficient in any case to warrant your rash decision to altogether resign the protection and kindly guardianship which she, on her part, has exercised over you for so many years. I cannot too strongly impress upon your mind the fatal effect any long absence from her is likely to have on your position in society, and though as yet you have only been about three weeks away, people are talking and will no doubt continue to talk. If you find your old home an agreeable change from town life, pray allow your aunt to join you there. She will do so, I am sure, with pleasure. She misses you very greatly, and I will never believe that you would wilfully cause her needless trouble. I may not, I know, express my own feelings on the subject, as I should probably only incur your scorn or displeasure, but simply as an honest man who *wishes you nothing* but good, I ask you quietly to consider *to what mis*representation and calumny you voluntarily ex-

pose yourself by running away, as it were, from a rightful and affectionate protector and second mother like your good aunt, and living all alone in the country without anyone of your immediate circle of friends within calling distance. Is there a more compromising or more ludicrous position than that of the independent and defenceless female? I think not. She is the laughing-stock of the clubs, and the perennial joke of the comic press. Pray do not place yourself in the same category with the despised and unlovely of your sex, but remain on the height where Nature placed you, and where your charm and intelligence can best secure acknowledgment from the less gifted and fortunate. Entreating your pardon for any word or phrase in this letter which may unluckily chance to annoy you, I am, my dear Miss Maryllia,—Yours with the utmost devotion, "ROXMOUTH."

"What a humbug he is!" said Maryllia, half aloud, as she put the letter back in its envelope and set it aside. "What a soft, smooth, civil, correctly trained humbug! How completely he ignores the possibility of my having *any* intelligence, even while he asks me to remain 'on the height' where it can best secure acknowledgment! He never appears to realise that my intelligence may be of such a quality as to enable me to see through *him* pretty clearly! And so the 'independent and defenceless female' is the laughing-stock of the clubs, is she? Well, I daresay he is quite right there! There's nothing braver for men to do at their clubs than to laugh at the 'defenceless' women who would rather fight the world alone and earn their own livelihood, than enter into loveless marriages. The quaintest part of the letter is the bit about Aunt Emily. Roxmouth must really think me a perfect idiot if

he dreams that I would accept such a story as that she was 'surprised and disturbed' at receiving the box of peacock's feathers. Aunt Emily was never 'surprised' or 'disturbed' at anything in her life, I am sure. When poor Uncle Fred died, she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes for five minutes, and then sat down at her desk to write her orders for mourning. And when I spoke my mind to her about Roxmouth, she only smiled and told me not to excite myself. Then when I said I had determined to leave her altogether and go back to my own home to live, she took it quite easily, and merely stated she would have to alter her will. I assured her I hoped she would do so at once, as I had no wish to benefit by her death. Then she didn't speak to me for several days, and I came away quietly without bidding her good-bye. And here I am,—and here I mean to stay!" She laughed a little, and moving to the open window, looked out on the quiet beauty of the landscape. "Yes!—I too will become a laughing-stock of the clubs;—and even *I* may attain the distinction of being accepted as a 'joke by the comic press!' I will be an 'independent and defenceless female,' and see how I get on! In any case I'd rather be defenceless than have Roxmouth as a defender. And I shall not be alone here, now that Cicely is coming. Besides, I have two men friends in the village,—at least, I *think* I have! I'm sure of one,—old Josey Letherbarrow!" The smile lingered on her lips, as she still looked out on the lawn and terrace, shadowed by the evening dusk, and sweet with the cool perfume of the rising dew. "And the other,—if he should turn out as agreeable as he seemed this morning,—why, he is a tower of strength so far as re*spectability* is concerned! What better protection can an 'independent and defenceless female' have than the minister

of the parish? I can go to him for a character, ask him for a reference, throw myself and my troubles upon him as upon a rock, and make him answer for me as an honest and well-intentioned parishioner! And I believe he would 'speak up' for me, as the poor folks say,—yes, my Lord Roxmouth!—I believe he would,—and if he did, I'm certain he would speak straight, and not whisper a few small poisonous lies round the corner! For I think" —and here the train of her reflections wandered away from her aunt and her lordly wooer altogether,—"yes,— I think Mr. Walden is a good man. I was not quite sure about him when I first met him,—I thought his eyes seemed deceitful,—so many parsons' eyes are!—but I looked well into them to-day,—and they're not the usual eyes of a parson at all,—they're just the eyes of a British sailor who has watched rough seas all his life,—and such eyes are always true."

CHAPTER XV.

On the following Monday afternoon Cicely Bourne, to whom Walden had so successfully telegraphed Maryllia's commands, arrived. She was decidedly an odd-looking young person. Her long thin legs were much too long for the shortness of her black cashmere frock which was made "en demoiselle," after the fashion adhered to in French convents, where girls are compelled to look as ugly as possible, in order that they may eschew the sin of personal vanity,—her hair, of a rich raven black, was plaited in a stiff thick braid resembling a Chinese pigtail, and was fastened at the end with a bow of ribbon,—and a pair of wonderfully brilliant dark eyes flashed under her arching brows, suggesting something weird and witchlike

in their roving glances, and giving an almost uncanny expression to her small, sallow face. But she was full of the most exuberant vitality,—she sparkled all over with it and seemed to exhale it in the mere act of breathing. Brimful of delight at the prospect of spending the whole summer with her friend and patroness, to whom she owed everything, and whom she adored with passionate admiration and gratitude, she dashed into the old-world silence and solitude of Abbot's Manor like a wild wave of the sea, crested with sunshine and bubbling over with ripples of mirth. Her incessant chatter and laughter awoke the long-hushed echoes of the ancient house to responsive gaiety, —and every pale lingering shadow of dullness or loneliness fled away from the exhilarating effect of her presence, which acted at once as a stimulant and charm to Maryllia, who welcomed her arrival with affectionate enthusiasm.

"But oh, my dear!" she exclaimed. "What a little school-guy they have made of you! You must have grown taller, surely, since November when I saw you last? Your frock is ever so much too short!"

"I don't think I've grown a bit"—said Cicely, glancing down at her own legs disparagingly—"But my frock wore shabby at the bottom, and the nuns had a fresh hem turned up all round. That reduced its length by a couple of inches at least. I told them as modestly as I could that my ankles were too vastly exposed, but they said it didn't matter, as I was only a day-boarder."

Maryllia's eyebrows went up perplexedly.

"I don't see what that has to do with it"—she said —"Would you have preferred to live in the Convent altogether, dear?"

"*Grand* merci!" and Cicely made an expressive *grimace*. "Not I! I should not have had half as many

lessons from Gigue, and I should never have been able to write to you without the Mère Supérieure spying into my letters. That's why none of the girls are allowed to have sealing-wax, because all their letters are ungummed over a basin of hot water and read before going to post. Discipline, discipline! Torquemada's Inquisition was nothing to it! Of course I had to tell the Mère Supérieure that you had sent for me, and that I should be away all summer. She asked heaps of questions, but she got nothing out of me, so of course she wrote to your aunt. But that doesn't matter, does it?"

"Not in the least,"—answered Maryllia, decisively,—"My aunt has nothing whatever to do with me now, nor I with her. I am my own mistress."

"And it becomes you amazingly!" declared Cicely. "I never saw you looking prettier! You are just the sweetest thing that ever fell out of heaven in human shape! Oh, Maryllia, what a lovely, lovely place this is! And is it all yours?—your very, very own?"

"My very, very own!"—and Maryllia, in replying to the question, felt a thrill of legitimate pride in the beautiful old Tudor house of her ancestors,—"I wish I had never been taken away from it! The more I see of it, the more I feel I ought not to have left it so long."

"It is real home, sweet home!" said Cicely, and her great eyes grew suddenly sad and wistful, as she slipped a caressing arm round her friend's waist. "How grateful I am to you for asking me to come and stay in it! Because, after all, I am only a poor little peasant,—with a musical faculty!"

Maryllia kissed her affectionately.

"You are a genius, my dear!"—she said—"There is no higher *supremacy*. What does Gigue say of you now?"

"*Gigue is satisfied, I think.* But I don't really know.

He says I'm too precocious—that my voice is a woman's before I'm a girl. It's abnormal—and I'm abnormal too, I know I am,—and I know it's horrid—but I can't help it. Where's the piano?"

"There isn't one in the house,"—said Maryllia, smiling—"Abbot's Manor has always lived about a hundred and fifty years behind the times. But I've sent for a boudoir grand—it will be here this week. Meanwhile, won't this do?" and she pointed to a quaint little instrument occupying a recess near the window—"It's a spinet of Charles the Second's period——"

"Delightful!" cried Cicely, ecstatically. "There's nothing sweeter in the whole world to sing to!"

Opening the painted lid with the greatest tenderness and care, she passed her hands lightly over the spinet's worn and yellow ivory keys and evoked a faint fairy-like tinkling.

"Listen! Isn't it like the wandering voice of some little ghost of the past trying to speak to us?" she said. "And in such sweet tune, too! Poor little ghost! Shall I sing to you? Shall I tell you that we have a sympathy in common with you, even though you are so old and so far, far away!"

Her lips parted, and a pure note, crystal clear and of such silvery softness as to seem more supernatural than human, floated upward on the silence. Maryllia caught her breath, and listened with a quickly beating heart,—she knew that the voice of this child whom she had rescued from a life of misery, was a world's marvel.

"Le doux printemps fait naître,—
Autant d'amours que de fleurs;
Tremblez, tremblez, jeunes cœurs;
Dès qu'il commence à paraître
Il faut cesser les froideurs."

Here with a sudden brilliant *roulade* the singer ran up the scale to the C in alt, and there paused with a trill as delicious and full as the warble of the nightingale.

"Mais ce qu'il a de douceurs
Vous coûtera cher peut-être,
Tremblez, tremblez jeunes cœurs,
Le doux printemps fait naître,
Autant d'amours que de fleurs!"

She ceased. The air, broken into delicate vibrations, carried the lovely sounds rhythmically outward, onward and into unechoing distance.

She turned and looked at Maryllia—then smiled.

"I see you are pleased,"—she said.

"Pleased! Cicely, I don't believe anyone was ever born into the world to sing as you sing!"

Cicely looked quaintly meditative.

"Well, I don't know about that!" she said. "You see there have been several millions of folks born into the world, and there may have been just *one* naturally created singer among them!" She laughed, and touched a chord on the spinet. "The old French song exactly suits this old French instrument. I see it is an ancient thing of Paris. Gigue says I have improved—but he will never admit much, as you know. He has forbidden me to touch the C in alt, and I did it just now. I cannot help it sometimes—it comes so easy. But you must scold me, Maryllia darling, when you hear me taking it,—I don't want to strain the vocal cords, and I always forget I'm only fourteen, I feel—oh! ever so much older!—ages old, in fact!" She sighed, and stretched her arms up above her head. "What a perfect room this is to sing in! What a perfect house!—and what a perfect angel you are *to have me with you!*"

Her eyes filled with sudden tears of emotion, but she quickly blinked them away.

"Et ce cher Roxmouth?" she queried, suddenly, glancing appreciatively at the rippling gold-brown lights and shades of her friend's hair, the delicate hues of her complexion, and the grace of her form. "Has he been to see you in this idyllic retreat?"

Maryllia gave a slight gesture of wearied impatience.

"Certainly not! How can you ask such a question, Cicely! I left my aunt on purpose to get rid of him once and for all. And he knows it;—yet he has written to me every two days regularly since I came here!"

"Hélas!—ce cher Roxmouth!" murmured Cicely, with a languid gesture imitative of the "society manner" of Mrs. Fred Vancourt,—"Parfait gentilhomme au bout des ongles!"

Maryllia laughed.

"Yes,—Aunt Emily all over!" she said. "How tired I am of that phrase! She knows as well as anybody that Roxmouth, for all his airs of aristocratic propriety, is a social villain of the lowest type of modern *décadence*, yet she would rather see me married to him than to any other man she has ever met. And why? Simply because he will be a Duke! She would like to say to all her acquaintances—'My niece is a Duchess.' She would feel a certain fantastic satisfaction in thinking that her millions were being used to build up the decayed fortunes of an English nobleman's family, as well as to 'restore' Roxmouth Castle, which is in a bad state of repair. And she would sacrifice *my* heart and soul and life to such trumpery ambitions as these!"

"*Trumpery* ambitions!" echoed Cicely. "My dear, *they are* ambitions for which nearly all women are willing

to scramble, fight and die! To be a Duchess! To dwell in an ancient 'restored' castle of once proud English nobles! Saint Moses! who wouldn't sacrifice such vague matters as heart, life and soul for the glory of being called 'Your Grace' by obsequious footmen! My unconventional Maryllia! You are setting yourself in rank, heretical opposition to the conventionalities of society, and won't all the little conventional minds hate you for it!"

"It doesn't matter if they do"—rejoined Maryllia—"I have never been loved since my father's death,—so I don't mind being hated."

"*I* love you!" said Cicely, with swift ardour. "Don't say you have never been loved!"

Maryllia caught her hand tenderly and kissed it.

"I was not thinking of you, dear!" she said. "Forgive me! I was thinking of men. They have admired me and flirted with me,—many of them have wanted to marry me, in order to get hold of Aunt Emily's fortune with me,—but none of them have ever *loved* me. Cicely, Cicely, I want to be *loved!*"

"So do I!" said Cicely, with answering light in her eyes. "But I don't see how it's going to be done in my case! *You* may possibly get your wish, but I!—why, my dear, I see myself *in futuro* as a 'prima donna assoluta' perhaps, with a lot of painted and padded *bassi* and *tenori* making sham love to me in opera till I get perfectly sick of *cuore* and *amore* and cry out for something else by way of a change! I am quite positive that love,—love such as we read of in poetry and romance, doesn't really exist. And I have another fixed opinion—which is that the people who write most about it have never felt it. One always expresses best, even in a song, the emotions one has never experienced."

Maryllia looked at her in a little wonder.

"Do you really think that?"

"I do! It's not one of Gigue's sayings, though I know I often echo Gigue!"

She went to the window. "How lovely the garden is! Come out on the lawn, Maryllia, and let us talk!" And as they sauntered across the grass together with arms round each other's waists, she chattered on. "People who write books and music are generally lonely,—and they write best about love because they need it. They fancy it must be much better than it is. But, after all, the grandest things go unloved. Look at the sky, how clear it is and pure. Is it loved by any other sky that we know of? And the sun up there, all alone in its splendour, —I wonder if any other sun loves it? There are so many lonely things in the universe! And it seems to me that the loneliest are always the loveliest and grandest. It is only stupid ephemera that are gregarious. Worms crawl along in masses,—mites swarm in a cheese—flies stick in crowds on jam—and brainless people shut themselves up all together within the walls of a city. I'd rather be an eagle than a sparrow,—a star than one of a thousand bonfire sparks,—and as a mere woman, I would rather ten thousand times live a solitary life by myself till I die, than be married to a rascal or a fool."

"Exactly my sentiments,"—said Maryllia—"Only you put them more poetically than I can. Do you know, Cicely, you talk very oddly sometimes?—very much in advance of your age, I mean?"

"Do I?" And Cicely's tone expressed a mingling of surprise and penitence. "I didn't know it. But I suppose *I really can't* help it, Maryllia. I was a very miserable *child—and* miserable children age rapidly. Perhaps I shall

get younger as I grow older! You must remember that at eleven years old I was scrubbing floors like any charwoman in the Convent for two centimes an hour. I gained a lot of worldly wisdom that way by listening to the talk of the nuns, which is quite as spiteful and scandalous as anything one hears in outside 'wicked' society. Then I got into the 'Quartier Latin' sort of set with Gigue, who picked me up because he heard me singing in the street,—and altogether my experiences of life haven't been toys and bonbons. I know I *think* 'old'—and I'm sure I feel old!"

"Not when you play or sing," said Maryllia.

"No—not then—never then! Then, all the youth of the world seems to rush into me,—it tingles in my fingers, and throbs in my throat! I feel as if I could reach heaven with sound!—yes! I feel that I could sing to God Himself, if He would only listen!"

Her eyes glowed with passion,—the plainness of her features was transformed into momentary beauty. Maryllia was silent. She knew that the aspirations of genius pent up in this elf-like girl were almost too strong for her, and that the very excitability and sensitiveness of her nature were such as to need the greatest care and tenderness in training and controlling. Tactfully she changed the conversation to ordinary subjects, and in a little while Cicely had learned all that Maryllia herself knew about the village of St. Rest and its inhabitants. She was considerably interested in the story of the rescue of the "Five Sister" beeches, and asked with a touch of anxiety, what had become of the dismissed agent, Oliver Leach?

"Oh, he is still in the neighbourhood,"—said Maryllia, indifferently. "*He works* for Sir Morton Pippitt, and I believe *has found a home* at Badsworth. His accounts are

not yet all handed in to my solicitors. But I have heard of a new agent,—a Mr. Stanways,—he is just married to quite a nice young woman,—and he is coming here almost immediately to begin work. Mr. Stanways has splendid recommendations—so that will be all right."

"No doubt—so far as Mr. Stanways himself is concerned it will be all right,"—rejoined Cicely, musingly—"But if, as you say, the man Oliver Leach cursed you, it isn't pleasant to think he is hanging around here."

"He isn't hanging round anywhere,"—declared Maryllia, easily—"He is out of this beat altogether. He cursed me certainly,—but he was in a temper,—and I should say that curses come naturally to him. But, as the clergyman was present at the time, the curse couldn't take any effect." She laughed. "You know Satan always runs away from the Church."

"Who is the clergyman, and what is he like?" asked Cicely.

"He's not at all disagreeable,"—answered Maryllia, carelessly—"Rather stiff perhaps and old-fashioned,—but he seems to be a great favourite with all his parishioners. His name is John Walden. He has restored the church here, quite at his own expense, and according to the early original design. It is really quite wonderful. When I was a child here, I only remember it as a ruin, but now people come from far and near to see it. It will please *you* immensely."

"But you don't go to it," observed Cicely, suggestively.

"No. I haven't attended a service there as yet. But I don't say I never will attend one. That will depend on *circumstances*."

"*I* remember you always hated parsons," said Cicely, *thoughtfully*,

Maryllia laughed.

"Yes, I always did!"

"And you always will, I suppose?"

"Well, I expect I shall have to tolerate Mr. Walden," —Maryllia answered lightly,—"Because he's really my nearest neighbour. But he's not so bad as most of his class."

"I daresay he's a better type of man than Lord Roxmouth anyway," said Cicely. "Do you know, Maryllia, that highly distinguished nobleman has spread about a report that you are 'peculiar,' simply because you won't marry him? The very nuns at the Convent have heard this, and it does make me so angry! For when people get hold of the word 'peculiar,' it is made to mean several things."

"I know!" and for a moment Maryllia's fair brows clouded with a shadow of perplexity and annoyance. "It is a word that may pass for madness, badness, or any form of social undesirability. But I don't mind! I'm quite aware that Roxmouth, if he cannot marry me, will slander me. It's a way some modern men have of covering their own rejection and defeat. The woman in question is branded through the 'smart set' as 'peculiar,' 'difficult,' 'impossible to deal with'—oh yes!—I know it all! But I'm prepared for it—and just to forestall Roxmouth a little, I'm going to have a few people down here by way of witnesses to my 'peculiar' mode of life. Then they can go back to London and talk."

"They can, and they will,—you may be sure of that!"—said Cicely, satirically—"Is this a 'dressed' county, Maryllia?"

Maryllia *gave vent to* a peal of laughter.

"*I should say not,*—but I really don't know!" she de-

clared. "People have called on me, but I have not, as yet, returned their calls. We'll do that in this coming week. The only person I have seen, who poses as a 'county' lady, is an elderly spinster named Tabitha Pippitt, only daughter of Sir Morton Pippitt, who is a Colonial manufacturer, and, therefore, not actually in the 'county' at all. Miss Tabitha was certainly not 'dressed,' she was merely covered."

"That's the very height of propriety!" declared Cicely. "For, after all, covering alone is necessary. 'Dress,' in the full sense of the word, implies vanity and all its attendant sins. Gigue says you can always pick out a very dull, respectable woman by the hideousness of her clothes. I expect Miss Tabitha is dull."

"She is—most unquestionably! But I'm afraid she is only a reflex of country life generally, Cicely. Country life *is* dull,—especially in England."

"Then why do you go in for it?" queried Cicely, arching her black brows perplexedly.

"Simply to escape something even duller,"—laughed Maryllia—"London society and 'Souls'!"

Cicely laughed too, and shrugged her shoulders expressively. She understood all that was implied. And with her whole heart she rejoiced that her friend whom she loved with an almost passionate adoration and gratitude, had voluntarily turned her back on the "Smart Set," and so, of her own accord, instead of through her godfathers and godmothers, had "renounced the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of this wicked world and all the sinful lusts of the flesh."

Within a very few days St. Rest became aware of *Cicely's* quaint personality, for she soon succeeded in

making herself familiar with everybody in the place. She had a knack of winning friends. She visited old Josey Letherbarrow, and made him laugh till he nearly choked, so that Maryllia had to pat him vigorously on the back to enable him to recover his breath—she cut jokes with Mrs. Tapple,—chatted with the sexton, Adam Frost, and scattered "sweeties" galore among all his children,—and she furthermore startled the village choir at practice by suddenly flitting into the church and asking Miss Eden, the schoolmistress, to allow her to play the organ accompaniment, and on Miss Eden's consenting to this proposition, she played in such a fashion that the church seemed filled with musical thunder and the songs of angels,—and the village choristers, both girls and boys, became awestruck and nervous, and huddled themselves together in a silent group, afraid to open their mouths lest a false note should escape, and spoil the splendour of the wonderful harmony that so mysteriously charmed their souls. And then, calming the passion of the music down, she turned with gentlest courtesy to Miss Eden, and asked: "What were the children going to sing?"—whereupon, being told that it was a hymn called "The Lord is my Shepherd," she so very sweetly entreated them to sing it with her, that none of them could refuse. And she led them all with wondrous care and patience, giving to the very simple tune, a tender and noble pathos such as they had never heard before, yet which they unconsciously absorbed into their own singing, as they lifted up their youthful voices in tremulous unison.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
He maketh me down to lie,
In pleasant fields where the lilies grow,
And the river runneth by.

The Lord is my Shepherd; He feedeth me
In the depth of a desert land,
And lest I should in the darkness slip,
He holdeth me by the hand.

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
My mind on Him is stayed,
And though through the Valley of Death I walk,
I shall not be afraid.

The Lord is my Shepherd; O Shepherd sweet,
Leave me not here to stray;
But guide me safe to Thy heavenly fold,
And keep me there, I pray!"

John Walden, passing through the churchyard just at this time, heard the rhythmic rise and fall of the quaint old melody with a strange thrill at his heart. He had listened to the self-same hymn over and over again,—every year the schoolchildren re-studied and re-sang it,—but there was something altogether new in its harmony this time,—something appealing and pathetic which struck to the inmost core of his sensitive nature. Noiselessly, he entered the church, and for a moment or two stood unobserved, watching the little scene before him. Cicely was at the organ, and her hands still rested on the keys, but she was speaking to the members of the choir.

"That is very nicely done,"—she said, encouragingly—"But you must try and keep more steadily together in tune, must they not, Miss Eden?"—and she turned to the schoolmistress at her side, who, with a smile, agreed. "*You*"—and she touched pretty Susie Prescott on the arm,—"You sing delightfully! It is a little voice—but so very sweet!"

Susie blushed deeply and curtsied. It had got about *in the village* that Miss Vancourt's young friend from Paris

was a musical "prodigy," and praise from her was something to be remembered.

"Now listen!" went on Cicely. "I'm not going to sing full voice, because I'm not allowed to yet,—but this is how that hymn should go!" And her pure tones floated forth *pianissimo,* with slow and tender solemnity:—

"The Lord is my Shepherd; O Shepherd sweet,
Leave me not here to stray;
But guide me safe to Thy heavenly fold,
And keep me there, I pray!
Amen."

Silence followed. The children stood wonder-struck, and Miss Eden's eyes filled with emotional tears.

"How beautiful!" she murmured. "How very beautiful!"

Cicely rose from the organ-stool, and turned round.

"Here is Mr. Walden," she said in quite a matter-of-fact way as she perceived him. "It *is* Mr. Walden, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is,"—replied John, advancing with a smile—"And very fortunate Mr. Walden is to have heard such lovely singing!"

"Oh, that's not lovely,"—said Cicely, carelessly—"I was only humming the last verse, just to put the expression right. I thought it must be you!—though, of course, as I have not been introduced to you, I couldn't be sure. Maryllia—Miss Vancourt—has told me all about you,—and I know she has written twice since I've been here to ask you up to the Manor—once to tea, and once to dinner. Why haven't you come?"

Walden was slightly embarrassed by this point-blank question. It was perfectly true he had received two invitations from the lady of the Manor, and had refused both. Why *he had refused,* he could not himself have told.

"I suppose you didn't want to meet *me!*" said Cicely showing all her white teeth in a flashing smile. "But there's no escape for it, you see,—here I am! I'm not such a rascal as I look, though! I've been playing accompaniments for the children!—go on singing, please!" —and she addressed Miss Eden and Susie Prescott, who collecting their straying thoughts, began hesitatingly to resume the interrupted practice. "It's a nice little organ —very full and sweet. The church is perfectly exquisite! —I come in every day to look at it except Sundays."

"Why except Sundays?" asked Walden, amused.

She gave him a quaint side-glance.

"I'll tell you some day,—not now!"—she answered— "This is not the fitting time or place." She moved to the altar rails, and hung over them, looking at the alabaster sarcophagus. "This thing has a perfect fascination for me!" she went on. "I can't bear not to know *whose* bones are inside! I wonder you haven't opened it."

"It was not meant to be opened by those who closed it," said Walden, quietly.

Cicely drooped her gipsy-bright eyes.

"That's one for me!" she thought. "He's just like what Maryllia says he is,—very certain of his own mind and not likely to move out of his own way."

"I think," pursued Walden, "that if you knew that someone very dear to you had been laid in that sarcophagus 'to eternal rest,' you would resent any disturbance of even the mere dust of what was once life,— would you not?"

"I might"—said Cicely dubiously—"But I have never *had any* 'someone very dear to me' except Maryllia Varcourt. And if *she* died, I should die too!"

John was silent, but he looked at her with increased interest and kindliness.

They walked out of the church together, and once in the open air, he became politely conventional.

"And how is Miss Vancourt?" he inquired.

"She is very well indeed"—replied Cicely—"But tremendously busy just now with no end of household matters. The new agent, Mr. Stanways, has arrived, and she is going over every yard of the Abbot's Manor property with him, and making any quantity of new rules. All the tenants' rents are to be reduced, for one thing—I know *that.* Then there are a lot of London people coming down to stay—big house-parties in relays,—I've helped write all the invitations—we shall be simply crowded at the end of June and all July. We mean to be *very* gay!"

"And you will like that, of course?" queried Walden, indulgently, while conscious of a little sense of hurt and annoyance, though he knew not why.

"Naturally!" and Cicely shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "Doesn't the Bible say 'the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot?' I love to set the pot down and hear the thorns crackle!"

What a weird girl she was! He looked at her in mute amaze, and she smiled.

"*Do* come up to tea some afternoon!" she said coaxingly. "We should be so glad to see you! I know Maryllia would like it—she thinks you are *rather* rude, you know! I'm to be here all the summer, but I'll try to be good and not say things to vex you. And as you're a clergyman, I can tell you all about myself—like the confessional secrets! And when you hear some of my *experiences, you* won't wonder a bit at my queer ways.

I can't be like other girls of my age,—I really *can't!*—my life won't let me!"

Her tone was one of light banter, but her eyes were wistful and pathetic. Walden was conscious of a sudden sympathy with this wild little soul of song, and taking her hand, pressed it kindly.

"Wait till I see some of your 'queer ways,' as you call them!" he said, with a genial laugh. "I know you sing very beautifully—is that a 'queer way?'"

Cicely shook her mop-like tresses of hair back over her shoulders with a careless gesture.

"It is—to people who can't do it!" she said. "Surely you know *that?* For example, if you preach very well—I don't know that you do, because I've never heard you, but Maryllia's housekeeper, Mrs. Spruce, says you've got 'a mouth of angels'—she does really!" and, as Walden laughed, she laughed with him—"Well, as I say, if you preach very well with a mouth of angels, there must be several parsons round here who haven't got that mouth, and who say of you, of course metaphorically: 'He hath a devil!' Isn't it so?"

John hesitated.

"No doubt opinions differ——" he began.

"Oh, of course!—you can get out of it that way, if you like!" she retorted, gaily. "You won't say uncharitable things of the rest of your brethren if you can help it, but you know—yes, you *must* know that parsons are as jealous of each other and as nasty to each other as actors, singers, writers, or any other 'professional' persons in the world. In fact, I believe if you were to set two *spiteful* clergymen nagging at each other, they'd beat any *two 'leading* ladies' on the operatic stage, for right-down *malice and* meanness."

"The conversation is growing quite personal!" said Walden, a broad smile lighting up his fine soft eyes. "Shall we finish it at the Manor when I come up to tea?"

"But are you really coming?" queried Cicely. "And when?"

"Suppose I say this afternoon——" he began. Cicely clapped her hands.

"Good! I'll scamper home and tell Maryllia! I'll say I have met you, and that I've been as impudent as I possibly could be to you——"

"No, don't say that!" laughed Walden. "Say that I have found you to be a very delightful and original young lady——"

"I'm not a young lady"—said Cicely, decisively—"I was born a peasant on the sea-coast of Cornwall—and I'm glad of it. A 'young lady' nowadays means a milliner's apprentice or a draper's model. I am neither. I am just a girl—and hope, if I live, to be a woman. I'll take my own ideas of a suitable message from you to Maryllia—don't *you* bother!" And she nodded sagaciously. "I won't make ructions I promise! Come about five!"

She waved her hand and ran off, leaving Walden in a mood between perplexity and amusement. She was certainly an "original," and he hardly knew what to make of her. There was something "uncanny" and goblin-like in her appearance, and yet her sallow face had a certain charm when the smile illumined it, and the light of aspiration burned up in the large wild eyes. In any case, she had persuaded him in a moment, as it were, and almost involuntarily, to take tea at the Manor that afternoon. Why he had consented to do what he had hitherto *refused, he could not* imagine. Cicely's remark that Miss

Vancourt thought him "rather rude," worried him a little.

"Perhaps I *have* been rude"—he reflected, uneasily—"But I am not a society man;—I'm altogether out of my element in the company of ladies—and it seemed so much better that I should avoid being drawn into any intimacy with persons who are not likely to have anything in common with me—but of course I ought to be civil—in fact, I suppose I ought to be neighbourly——"

Here a sudden irritation against the nature of his own thoughts disturbed him. He was not arguing fairly with himself, and he knew it. He was perfectly aware that ever since the day of their meeting in the village post-office, he had wished to see Miss Vancourt again. He had hoped she might pass the gate of the rectory, or perhaps even look into his garden for a moment,—but his expectation had not been realised. He had heard of Cicely Bourne's arrival,—and he had received two charmingly-worded notes from Maryllia, inviting him to the Manor,—which invitations, as has already been stated, he had, with briefest courtesy, declined. Now, why,—if he indeed wished to see her again,—had he deliberately refused the opportunities given him of doing so? He could not answer this at all satisfactorily to his own mind, and he was considerably annoyed with himself to be forced to admit the existence of certain portions of his mental composition which were apparently not to be probed by logic, or measured by mathematics.

"Well, at any rate, as I have promised the little singer, I can go up to tea just this once, and have done with *it*," he decided. "I shall then be exonerated from 'rudeness'—and I can explain to Miss Vancourt—quite kindly and courteously of course—that I am not a visiting man,

—that my habits are rather those of a recluse, and then —for the future—she will understand."

Cicely Bourne, meanwhile, on her way back to the Manor through the fields, paused many times to gather cowslips, which were blooming by thousands in the grass at her feet, and as she recklessly pulled up dozens of the pale-green stems, weighted with their nodding golden honey-bells, she thought a good deal about John Walden.

"Maryllia never told me he was handsome,"—she mused—"But he is! I wonder why she didn't mention it? So odd of her,—because really there are very few good-looking men anywhere, and one in the shape of a parson is a positive rarity and ought to go on exhibition! He's clever too—and—obstinate? Yes, I should say he was obstinate. But he has kind eyes. And he isn't married. What a comfort *that* is! Parsons are uninteresting enough in themselves as a rule, but their wives are the last possibility in the way of dullness. Oh, that honeysuckle!" And she sprang over the grass to the corner of a hedge where a long trail of the exquisitely-scented flower hung temptingly, as it seemed within reach, but when she approached it, she found it just too high above her to be plucked from the bough where its tendrils twined. Looking up at it, she carolled softly:

"O Fortune capricieuse!
Comme tu es cruelle!
Pourquoi moques-tu ton esclave
Qui sert un destin immortel!"

Here a sudden rustle in the leaves on the other side of the hedge startled her, and a curious-looking human head adorned profusely with somewhat disordered locks of red hair perked up inquiringly. Cicely jumped back *with an exclamation.*

"Saint Moses! What is it?"

"It is me! Merely me!" and Sir Morton Pippitt's quondam guest, Mr. Julian Adderley, rose to his full lanky height, and turned his flaccid face of more or less comic melancholy upon her. "Pray do not be alarmed! I have been reposing under the trees,—and I was, or so I imagine, in a brief slumber, when some dulcet warblings as of a nightingale awoke me,"—here, stooping to the ground for his hat, he secured it, and waved it expressively,—"and I have, I fear, created some dismay in the mind of the interesting young person who, if I mistake not, is a friend of Miss Vancourt?"

Cicely surveyed him with considerable amusement.

"Never mind who *I* am!" she said, coolly. "Tell me who *you* are! My faith!—you are as rough all over as a bear! What have you been doing to yourself? Your clothes are covered with leaves!"

"Even as a Babe in the Wood!" responded Adderley. "Yes!—it is so!" and he began to pick off delicately the various burs and scraps of forest *débris* which had collected and clung to his tweed suit during his open-air *siesta*. "To speak truly, I am a trespasser in these domains,—they are the Manor woods, I know,—forbidden precincts and possibly guarded by spring-guns. But I heeded not the board which speaks of prosecution. I came to gather bluebells,—innocent bluebells!—merely that and no more, to adorn my humble cot,—I have a cot not far from here. And as for my identity, my name is Adderley—Julian Adderley—a poor scribbler of rhymes—*à votre service!*"

He waved his hat with a grand flourish again, and smiled.

"*Oh I know!*" said Cicely. "Marylla has spoken of *you—you've taken* a cottage here for the summer. Pick

that bit of honeysuckle for me, will you?—that long trail just hanging over you!"

"With pleasure!" and he gathered the coveted spray and handed it to her.

"Thanks!" and she smiled appreciatively as she took it. "How did you get into that wood? Did you jump the hedge?"

"I did!" replied Adderley.

"Could you jump it again?"

"Most assuredly!"

"Then do it!"

Whereupon Adderley clapped his hat on his head, and resting a hand firmly on one of the rough posts which supported the close green barrier between them, vaulted lightly over it and stood beside her.

"Not badly done"—said Cicely, eyeing him quizzically —"for 'a poor scribbler of rhymes' as you call yourself. Most men who moon about and write verse are too drunken and vicious to even see a hedge,—much less jump over it."

"Oh, say not so!" exclaimed Adderley. "You are too young to pass judgment on the gods!"

"The gods!" exclaimed Cicely. "Whatever are you talking about? The gods of Greece? They were an awful lot—perfectly awful! They wouldn't have been admitted *even* into modern society, and that's bad enough. I don't think the worst woman that ever dined at a Paris restaurant with an English Cabinet Minister would have spoken to Venus, *par exemple.* I'm sure she wouldn't. She'd have drawn the line *there.*"

"Gracious Heavens!" and Adderley stared in wonderment at his companion, first up, then down,—at her wild hair, scarcely restrained by the big sun-hat which was tied on anyhow,—at her great dark eyes,—at her thin

angular figure and long scraggy legs,—legs which were still somewhat too visible, though since her arrival at Abbot's Manor Maryllia had made some thoughtful alterations in the dress of her musical *protégée* which had considerably improved her appearance. "Is it possible to hear such things——"

"Why, of course it is, as you've got ears and *have* heard them!" said Cicely, with a laugh. "Don't ask 'is it possible' to do a thing when you've done it! That's not logical,—and men do pride themselves on their logic, though I could never find out why. Do you like cowslips?" And she thrust the great bunch she had gathered up against his nose. "There's a wordless poem for you!"

Inhaling the fresh fine odour of the field blossoms, he still looked at her in amazement, she meeting his gaze without the least touch of embarrassment.

"You can walk home with me, if you like"—she observed condescendingly—"I won't promise to ask you into the Manor, because perhaps Maryllia won't want you, and I daresay she won't approve of my picking up a young man in the woods. But it's rather fun to talk to a poet, —I've never met one before. They don't come out in Paris. They live in holes and corners, drinking absinthe to keep off hunger."

"Alas, that is so!" and Adderley began to keep pace with the thin black-stockinged legs that were already starting off through the long grass and flowers. "The arts are at a discount nowadays. Poetry is the last thing people want to read."

"Then why do you write it?" and Cicely turned a *sharp* glance of inquiry upon him. "What's the good?"

"*There* you offer me a problem miss—er—miss——"

"*Bourne*"—finished Cicely—"Don't fight with my name.

—it's quite easy—though I don't know how I got it. I ought to have been a Tre or a Pol—I was born in Cornwall. Never mind that,—go on with the 'problem.'"

"True—go on with the problem"—said Julian vaguely, taking off his hat and raking his hair with his fingers as he was wont to do when at all puzzled—"The problem is—'why do I write poetry if nobody wants to read it'—and 'what's the good?' Now, in the first place, I will reply that I am not sure I write 'poetry.' I try to express my identity in rhythm and rhyme—but after all, that expression of myself may be prose, and wholly without interest to the majority. You see? I put it to you quite plainly. Then as to 'what's the good?'—I would argue 'what's the bad?' So far, I live quite harmlessly. From the unexpected demise of an uncle whom I never saw, I have a life-income of sixty pounds a year. I am happy on that —I desire no more than that. On that I seek to evolve myself into *something*—from a nonentity into shape and substance—and if, as is quite possible, there can be no 'good,' there may be a certain less of 'bad' than might otherwise chance to me. What think you?"

Cicely surveyed him scrutinisingly.

"I'm not at all sure about that"—she said—"Poets have all been doubtful specimens of humanity at their best. You see their lives are entirely occupied in writing what isn't true—and of course it 'tells' on them in the long run. They deceive others first, and then they deceive themselves, though in their fits of 'inspiration' as they call it, they may, while weaving a thousand lies, accidentally hit on one truth. But the lies chiefly predominate. Dante, for example, was a perfectly brazen liar. He *didn't* go to Hell, or Purgatory, or Paradise—and he *didn't* bother *himself about* Beatrice at all. He married someone else

and had a family. Nothing could be more commonplace. He invented his *Inferno* in order to put his enemies there, all roasting, boiling, baking or freezing. It was pure personal spite—and it is the very force of his vindictiveness that makes the *Inferno* the best part of his epic. The portraits of Dante alone are enough to show you the sort of man he was. *What* a creature to meet in a dark lane at midnight!"

Here she made a grimace, drawing her mouth down into the elongated frown of the famous Florentine, with such an irresistibly comic effect that Adderley gave way to a peal of hearty, almost boyish laughter.

"That's right!" said Cicely approvingly. "That's *you*, you know! It's natural to laugh at your age—you're only about six or seven-and-twenty, aren't you?"

"I shall be twenty-seven in August"—he said with a swift return to solemnity—"That is, as you will admit, getting on towards thirty."

"Oh, nonsense! Everybody's getting on towards thirty, of course—or towards sixty, or towards a hundred. I shall be fifteen in October, but 'you will admit'"—here she mimicked his voice and accent—"that I am getting on towards a hundred. Some folks think I've turned that already, and that I'm entering my second century, I talk so 'old.' But my talk is nothing to what I feel—I feel—oh!" and she gave a kind of angular writhe to her whole figure—"like twenty Methusalehs in one girl!"

"You are an original!"—said Julian, nodding at her with an air of superior wisdom—"That's what you are!"

"Like you, Sir Moon-Calf"—said Cicely—"The word *'moon-calf,'* you know, stands for poet—it means a human *calf that grazes* on the moon. Naturally the animal never *gets fat,—nor* will you; it always looks odd—and so will

you; it never does anything useful,—nor will you; and it puts a kind of lunar crust over itself, under which crust it writes verses. When you break through its crust you find something like a man, half-asleep—not knowing whether he's man or boy, and uncertain whether to laugh or be serious till some girl pokes fun at him—and then——"

"And then?"—laughed Adderley, entering vivaciously into her humour—"What next?"

"This, next!"—and Cicely pelted him full in the face with one of her velvety cowslip-bunches—"And this,—catch me if you can!"

Away she flew over the grass, with Adderley after her. Through tall buttercups and field daisies they raced each other like children,—startling astonished bees from repasts in clover-cups—and shaking butterflies away from their *amours* on the starwort and celandines. The private gate leading into Abbot's Manor garden stood open,—Cicely rushed in, and shut it against her pursuer who reached it almost at the same instant.

"Too bad!" he cried laughingly. "You mustn't keep me out! I'm bound to come inside!"

"Why?" demanded Cicely, breathless with her run, but looking all the better for the colour in her cheeks and the light in her eyes. "I don't see the line of argument at all. Your hair is simply dreadful! You look like Pan, heated in the pursuit of a coy nymph of Delphos. If you only wore skins and a pair of hoofs, the resemblance would be perfect!"

"My dear Cicely!" said a dulcet voice at this moment. "Where *have* you been all the morning! How do you do, Mr. Adderley? Won't you come in?"

Adderley took off his hat, as Maryllia came across to the gate from the umbrageous shadow of a knot of pine-trees, looking the embodiment of fresh daintiness, in a

soft white gown trimmed with wonderfully knotted tufts of palest rose ribbon, and wearing an enchanting "poke" straw hat with a careless knot of pink hyacinths tumbling against her lovely hair. She was a perfect picture "after Romney," and Adderley thought she knew it. But there he was wrong. Maryllia knew little and cared less about her personal appearance.

"Where have you been?" she repeated, taking Cicely round the waist. "You wild girl! Do you know it is lunch time? I had almost given you up. Spruce said you had gone into the village—but more than that she couldn't tell me."

"I did go to the village"—said Cicely—"and I went into the church, and played the organ, and helped the children sing a hymn. And I met the parson, Mr. Walden, and had a talk with him. Then I started home across the fields, and found this man"—and she indicated Adderley with a careless nod of her head—"asleep in a wood. I almost promised him some lunch—I didn't *quite*——"

"My dear Miss Vancourt"—protested Adderley—"pray do not think of such a thing!—I would not intrude upon you in this unceremonious way for the world!"

"Why not?" said Maryllia, smiling graciously. "It will be a pleasure if you will stay to luncheon with us. Cicely has *carte blanche* here you know—genius must have its way!"

"Of course it must"—agreed Cicely—"if genius wants to stand on its head, it must be allowed to make that exhibition of itself lest it should explode. If genius asks the lame, halt, blind and idiotic into the ancestral halls of Abbot's Manor, then the lame, halt, blind and idiotic are *bound to* come. If genius summons the god Pan to pipe *a roundelay,* pipings there shall be! Shall there not, Mr. *Pan Adderley?*"

Her eyes danced with mirth and mischief, as they flashed from his face to Maryllia's. "Genius,"—she continued—"can even call forth a parson from the vasty deep if it chooses to do so,—Mr. Walden is coming to tea this afternoon."

"Indeed!" And Maryllia's sweet voice was a trifle cold. "Did you invite him, Cicely?"

"Yes. I told him that you thought it rather rude of him not to have come before——"

"Oh Cicely!" said Maryllia reproachfully. "You should not have said that!"

"Why not? You did think him rude,—and so did I,—to refuse two kind invitations from you. Anyhow he seemed sorry, and said he'd make up for it this afternoon. He's really quite good-looking."

"Quite—quite!" agreed Julian Adderley. "I considered him exceptionally so when I first saw him in his own church, opposing a calm front to the intrusive pomposity and appalling ignorance of our venerable acquaintance, Sir Morton Pippitt. I decided that I had found a Man. So new!—so fresh! That is why I took a cottage for the summer close by, that I might be near the rare specimen!"

Maryllia laughed.

"Are you not a man yourself?" she said.

"Not altogether!" he admitted. "I am but half-grown. I am a raw and unpleasing fruit even to my own palate. John Walden is a ripe and mellow creature,—moreover, he seems still ripening in constant sunshine. I go every Sunday to hear him preach, because he reminds me of so much that I had forgotten."

Here they went in to luncheon. Maryllia threw off her hat as she seated herself at the head of the table, ruffling

her hair with the action into prettier waves of brown-gold. Her cheeks were softly flushed,—her blue eyes radiant.

"You are a better parishioner than I am, Mr. Adderley"—she said—"I have not been to church once since I came home. I never go to church."

"Naturally! I quite understand! Few people of any education or intelligence can stand it nowadays," he replied. "The Christian myth is well-nigh exploded. Yet one cannot help having a certain sympathy and interest in men, who, like Mr. Walden, appear to still honestly believe in it."

"The Christian myth!" echoed Cicely. "My word! You do lay down the law! Where should we be without the 'myth', I wonder?"

"Pretty much where we are now"—said Julian—"Two thousand years of the Christian dispensation leaves the world still pagan. Self-indulgence is still paramount. Wealth still governs both classes and masses. Politics are still corrupt. Trade still plays its old game of 'beggar my neighbour.' What would you! And in this day there is no restraining influence on the laxity of social morals. Literature is decadent,—likewise Painting;—Sculpture and Poetry are moribund. Man's inborn monkeyishness is obtaining the upper hand and bearing him back to his natural filth,—and the glimmerings of the Ideal as shown forth in a few examples of heroic and noble living are like the flash of the rainbow-arch spanning a storm-cloud,—beautiful, but alas!—evanescent."

"I'm afraid you are right"—said Maryllia, with a little sigh—"It is very sad and discouraging, but I fear very *true.*"

"It's nothing of the kind"—declared Cicely, with quick *vehemence*—"It's just absolute nonsense! It is! A

'never shake thy glory locks at me,' Sir Moon-Calf!" and she made a little grimace across the table at Julian, who responded to it with a complacent smile. "You can talk, talk, talk—of course; every man that ever sat in clubs, smoking and drinking, can talk one's head off—but you've got to *live,* as well as talk! What do you know about self-indulgence being 'paramount,' except in your own case, eh? Do you think at all of the thousands and thousands of poor creatures everywhere, who completely sacrifice their lives to the needs of others?"

"Of course there are such—" admitted Adderley—"But——"

"No 'buts' come into the case," went on the young girl, her eyes darkening with the earnestness of her thoughts. "I have seen quite enough even in my time to know how good and kind to one another even the poorest people can be. And I have had plenty of hardships to endure, too! But I can tell you one thing—and that is, that the Christian 'myth' as you call it, is just the one thing that makes *my* life worth living. I don't want to talk about religion—I never do,—I only just say this—that the great lesson of Christianity is exactly what we most need to learn."

"In what way?" asked Julian, smiling indulgently.

"Why,—merely that if one is honest and true, one *must* be crucified. Therefore one is prepared,—and there's no need to cry out when the nails are driven in. The Christian 'myth' teaches us what to expect, how to endure, and how at last to triumph!"

A lovely light illumined her face, and Maryllia looked at her very tenderly. Adderley was silent.

"Nothing does one so much good as to be hurt"—went on Cicely in a lighter tone—"You then become

aware that you are a somebody whom other bodies envy. You never know how high you have climbed till you feel a few dirty hands behind you trying to pull you down. When I start my career as a singer, I shall not be satisfied till I get anonymous letters every morning, telling me what a fraud and failure I am. Then I shall realise that I am famous!"

"Alas!" said Julian with a comically resigned air. "I shall never be of sufficient importance for that! No one would waste a penny stamp on *me!* All I can ever hope to win is the unanimous abuse of the press. That will at last give me an interested public!"

They laughed.

"Is Mr. Marius Longford a great friend of yours?" enquired Maryllia.

"Ah, that I cannot tell!" replied Julian. "He may be friend, or he may be foe. He writes for a great literary paper—and is a member of many literary clubs. He has produced three books—all monstrously dull. But he has a Clique. Its members are sworn to praise Longford, or die. Indeed, if they do not praise Longford, they become mysteriously exterminated, like rats or beetles. I myself have praised Longford, lest I also get a dose of his unfailing poison. He will not praise *me*—but no matter for that. If he would only abuse me!—but he won't! His blame is far more valuable than his eulogy. At present he stands like a kind of neutral whipping-post—very much in my way!"

"He knows Lord Roxmouth, he tells me"—went on Maryllia; whereat Cicely's sharp glance flashed at her inquisitively—"Lord Roxmouth is by way of being a patron *of the arts.*"

The tone of her voice, slightly contemptuous, was not

lost on Adderley. He fancied he was on dangerous ground.

"I have never met Lord Roxmouth myself"—he said —"But I have heard Longford speak of him. Longford however rather 'makes' for society. I do not. Longford is quite at home with dukes and duchesses——"

"Or professes to be—" put in Maryllia, with a slight smile.

"Or professes to be,—I accept the correction!" agreed Adderley.

"Personally, I know nothing of him"—said Maryllia— "I have never seen him at any of the functions in London, and I should imagine him to be a man who rather over-estimated himself. So many literary men do. That is why most of them are such terrible social bores."

"To the crime of being a literary man I plead not guilty!" and Julian folded his hands in a kind of mock-solemn appeal. "Moreover, I swear never to become one!"

"Good boy!" smiled Cicely. "Be a modern Pan, and run away from all the literary cliques, kicking up the dust behind you in their faces as you go! Roam the woods in solitude and sing!

" 'The wind in the reeds and the rushes,
The bees on the bells of thyme,
The birds on the myrtle bushes,
The cicale above in the lime,
And the lizards below in the grass,
Were as silent as ever old Tmolus was,
Listening to my sweet pipings!' "

"Ah, Shelley!" cried Adderley. "Shelley the divine! And how divinely you utter his lines! Do you know the last verse of that poem:—'I sang of the dancing stars?' "

Cicely raised her hand, commanding attention, and went on:

"'I sang of the dancing stars,
I sang of the dædal Earth,
And of Heaven,—and the giant wars,
And Love and Death and Birth.
And then I changed my pipings,—
Singing, how down the vale of Menalus,
I pursued a maiden and clasped a reed,
Gods and men, we are all deluded thus!
It breaks in our bosom and then we bleed;
All wept, as I think both ye now would,
If envy or age had not frozen your blood,
At the sorrow of my sweet pipings!'"

"Beau-tiful!—beau-tiful!" sighed Adderley. "But so remote!—so very remote! Alas!—who reads Shelley now?"

"I do"—said Cicely—"Maryllia does. You do. And many more. Shelley didn't write for free libraries and public-houses. He wrote for the love of Art,—and he was drowned. You do the same, and perhaps you'll be hung! It doesn't much matter how you end, so long as you begin to be something no one else can be."

"*You* have certainly begun in that direction!" said Julian.

Cicely shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know! I am myself. Most people try to be what they're not. Such a waste of time and effort! That's why I've taken a fancy to the parson I met this morning, Mr. Walden. He is himself and no other. He is as much himself as old Josey Letherbarrow is. Josey is an individuality. So is Mr. Walden. So is Maryllia. So am I. And—" here she pointed a witch-like finger at Adderley—"so would you be, if you didn't 'pose' as much as you do!"

"Cicely!" murmured Maryllia, warningly, though she smiled.

A slight flush swept over Adderley's face. But he took the remark without offence, thereby showing himself

to be of better mettle than the little affectations of his outward appearance indicated.

"You think so?" he said, placidly. "That is very dear of you!—very young! You may be right—you may be wrong,—but from one so unsophisticated as yourself it is a proposition worth considering—to pose, or not to pose! It is so new—so fresh!"

CHAPTER XVI.

WALDEN kept his promise and duly arrived to tea at the Manor that afternoon. He found his hostess in the library with Cicely and Julian. She was showing to the latter one or two rare "first editions," and was talking animatedly, but she broke off her conversation the moment he was announced, and advanced to meet him with a bright smile.

"At last, Mr. Walden!" she said. "I am glad Cicely has succeeded where I failed, in persuading you to accept the welcome that has awaited you here for some time!"

The words were gracefully spoken, with just the faintest trace of kindly reproach in their intonation. Simple as they were, they managed to deprive John of all power to frame a suitable reply. He bowed over the little white hand extended to him, and murmured something which was inaudible even to himself, while he despised what he considered his own foolishness, clumsiness and general ineptitude from the bottom of his heart. Maryllia saw his embarrassment, and hastened to relieve him of it.

"We have been talking books,"—she said, lightly—"Mr. Adderley has almost knelt in adoration before my *Shakespeare 'first folio.'* It is very precious, being un-

calendared in the published lists of ordinary commentators. I suppose you have seen it?"

"Indeed I have"—replied Walden, as he shook hands with Cicely and nodded pleasantly to Julian—"I'm afraid, Miss Vancourt, that if you knew how often I have sat alone in this library, turning over the precious volumes, you might be very angry with me! But I have saved one or two from the encroaches of damp, such as the illuminated vellum 'Petrarch,' and some few rare manuscripts—so you must try to forgive my trespass. Mrs. Spruce used to let me come in and study here whenever I liked."

"Will you not do so still?" queried Maryllia, sweetly. "I can promise you both solitude and silence."

Again a wave of awkwardness overcame him. What could he say in response to this friendly and gentle graciousness?

"You are very kind," he murmured.

"Not at all. The library is very seldom used—so the kindness will be quite on your side if you can make it of service. I daresay you know more about the books than I do. My father was very proud of them."

"He had cause to be,"—said Walden, beginning to recover his equanimity and ease as the conversation turned into a channel which was his natural element—"It is one of the finest collections in England. The manuscripts alone are worth a fortune." Here he moved to the table where Adderley stood turning over a wondrously painted "Book of Hours"—"That is perfect twelfth-century work" —he said—"There is a picture in it which ought to please *Miss Cicely*"—and he turned the pages over tenderly—*"Here it is,*—the loveliest of Saint Cecilias, in the act of *singing!"*

Cicely smiled with pleasure, and hung over the beautifully illuminated figure, surrounded with angels in clouds of golden glory.

"There's one thing about Heaven which everybody seems agreed upon"—she said—"It's a place where we're all expected to sing."

"Not a doubt of it!" agreed Walden. "You will be quite in your element!"

"The idea of Heaven is remote—so very remote!" said Adderley. "But if such a place existed, and I were bound to essay a vocal effort there, I should transform it at once to Hell! The angels would never forgive me!"

They laughed.

"Let us go into the garden"—said Maryllia—"It is quite lovely just now,—there are such cool deep shadows on the lawn."

Cicely at once ran out, beckoning Adderley to follow. Maryllia tied on her hat with its pink strings and its bunch of pink hyacinths tumbling against her small shell-like ear, and looked up from under its brim with an entrancing smile.

"Will you come, Mr. Walden?"

John murmured something politely inarticulate in assent. He was, as has already been stated, apt to be rather at a loss in the company of women, unless they were well-seasoned matrons and grandames, with whom he could converse on the most ordinary and commonplace topics, such as the curing of hams, the schooling of children, or the best remedies for rheumatism. A feminine creature who appeared to exist merely to fascinate the eye and attract the senses, moved him to a kind of mental confusion, *which affected* himself chiefly, as no one, save the *most intimate of his* friends, would ever have noticed it,

or guessed that he was at any sort of pains to seem at ease. Just now, as he took his soft shovel-hat, and followed his fair hostess out on the lawn, his mind was more or less in a state of chaos, and the thoughts that kept coming and going were as difficult to put in consecutive order as a Chinese puzzle. One uncomfortable memory however sat prominently in a corner of his brain like the mocking phantasm of a mischievous Puck, pointing its jeering finger and reminding him of the fact, not to be denied, that but a short while ago, he had made up his mind to dislike, aye, even to detest that mysterious composition of white and rose, blue eyes and chestnut-gold hair, called Maryllia Vancourt,—that he had resolved she would be an altogether objectionable personage in the village—*his* village—of St. Rest,—and that he had wished—Ah! what had he wished? Back, O teazing reminder of the grudging and suspicious spirit that had so lately animated the soul of a Christian cleric! Yet it had to be admitted, albeit now reluctantly, that he had actually wished the rightful mistress of Abbot's Manor had never returned to it! Smitten with sorest compunction at the recollection of his former blind prejudice against the woman he had then never seen, he walked by her side over the warm soft grass, listening with a somewhat preoccupied air to the remarks she was making concerning Cicely Bourne, and the great hopes she entertained of the girl's future brilliant career.

"She is more or less untrained now," explained Maryllia. "But she is very young, and she has suffered some terrible hardships. She needs a certain amount of *rest and liberty* to recover from all the slights and cruelties she endured in her childhood. You must hear her *sing one of* Chopin's valses! It is perfectly exquisite!

Her voice has such an extensive range,—she is contralto, mezzo-soprano, and soprano all in one."

"A wonderful gift!" murmured Walden absently, trying to pull himself together, and to escape from the coiling threads of a strange mystically spun charm that seemed to wind round and round him with soft and silken persistence, as the sweet voice so close to his ear rippled on in a rise and fall of music. "You must be very proud of your *protégée*."

"I am indeed!" she replied. "Really the only useful thing I have ever done in my life is to rescue Cicely from uncongenial surroundings, and provide her with all she needs for her musical career. To help bring out a great genius gives *me* some little sense of importance, you see! In myself I am such an utter nonentity."

She laughed. Walden looked at her with an earnestness of which he was scarcely conscious. She coloured a little, and her eyes fell. Something in the sudden delicate flush of her cheeks and the quick droop of her eyelashes startled him,—he felt a curious sense of contrition, as though he had given her some indefinable, altogether shadowy cause for that brief discomposure. The idea that she seemed, even for a second, not quite so much at her ease, restored his own nerve and self-possession, and it was with an almost paternal gentleness that he said,

"Do you really consider yourself a nonentity, Miss Vancourt? I am sure the society you have left behind you in London does not think you so."

She opened her sea-blue eyes full upon him.

"Society? Why do you speak of it? Its opinion of me or of anyone else, is surely the last thing a sensible man or woman would care for, I imagine! One 'season' of it *was enough for* me. I have unfortunately had several *'seasons,' and they* were all too many."

Again Walden looked at her, but this time she did not seem to be aware of his scrutiny.

"Do you take me for a member of the 'smart' set, Mr. Walden?" she queried, gaily. "You are very much mistaken if you do! I have certainly mixed with it, and know all about it—much to my regret—but I don't belong to it. Of course I like plenty of life and amusement, but 'society' as London and Paris and New York express it in their modes and manners and 'functions,' is to me the dullest form of entertainment in the world."

Walden was silent. She gave him a quick side-glance of enquiry.

"I suppose you have been told something about me?" she said. "Something which represents me otherwise than as I represent myself. Have you?"

At this abrupt question John fairly started out of his semi-abstraction in good earnest.

"My dear Miss Vancourt!" he exclaimed, warmly. "How can you think of such a thing! I have never heard a word about you, except from good old Mrs. Spruce who knew you as a child, and who loves to recall these days, —and—er—and——"

He broke off, checking himself with a vexed gesture.

"And—er—and—er—who else?" said Maryllia, smiling——"Now don't play tricks with *me,* or I'll play tricks with *you!*"

His eyes caught and reflected her smile.

"Well,—Sir Morton Pippitt spoke of you once in my hearing"—he said—"And a friend of his whom he brought to see the church, the Duke of Lumpton. Also a clergyman in this neighbourhood, a Mr. Leveson—rector at Badsworth—*he* mentioned you, and presumed—" here John

paused a moment,—"yes, I think I may say *presumed*—to know you personally."

"Did he really! I never heard of him!" And she laughed merrily. "Mr. Walden, if I were to tell you the number of people who profess to know *me* whom *I* do not know and never *will* know, you would be surprised! I never spoke to Sir Morton Pippitt in my life till the other day, though he pretends he has met me,—but he hasn't. He may have seen me perhaps by chance when I was a child in the nursery, but I don't remember anything about him. My father never visited any of the people here,—we lived very much to ourselves. As for the Duke of Lumpton,—well!—nobody knows *him* that can possibly avoid it—and I have never even so much as seen him. Aunt Emily may possibly have spoken of me in these persons' hearing—that's quite likely,—but they know nothing of me at first hand." She paused a moment. "Look at Cicely!" she said. "How quickly she makes friends! She and Mr. Adderley are chattering away like two magpies!"

Walden looked in the direction indicated, and saw the couple at some distance off, under the great cedar-tree which was the chief ornament of the lawn,—Cicely seated in a low basket-chair, and Adderley stretched on the grass at her feet. Both were talking eagerly, both were gesticulating excitedly, and both looked exactly what they were, two very eccentric specimens of humanity.

"They seem perfectly happy!" he said, smiling. "Adderley is a curious fellow, but I think he has a good heart. He puts on a mannerism, because he has seen the members of a certain literary 'set' in London put it on—*but he'll drop that* in time,—when he is a little older and *wiser. He has* been in to see me once or twice since he

took up his residence here for the summer. He tries to discuss religion with me—or rather, I should say, irreligion. His own special 'cult' is the easy paganism of Omar Khayyám."

"Is he clever?"

"I think he is. He has a more or less original turn of mind. He read me some of his verses the other day."

"Poor you!" laughed Maryllia.

"Well, I was inclined to pity myself when he first began"—said Walden, laughing also—"But I must confess I was agreeably surprised. He has real poetic perception and a fine musical ear. Some of his fancies are quite charming."

They had been walking slowly across the lawn, and were now within a few steps of the big cedar-tree.

"I must take you into the rose-garden, Mr. Walden" —and she raised her eyes to his with that childlike confiding look which was one of her special charms,—"The roses are just budding out, and I want you to see them before the summer gets more advanced. Though I daresay you know every rose-bush in the place, don't you?"

"I believe I do!" he admitted. "You see an old fogey like myself is bound to have hobbies, and my particular hobby is gardening. I love flowers, and I go everywhere I can, or may, to see them and watch their growth. So that for years I have visited your rose-garden, Miss Vancourt! I have been a regular and persistent trespasser,—but all the same, I have never plucked a rose."

"Well, I wish you had!" said Maryllia, feeling somewhat impatient with him for calling himself an "old fogey," —*why did* he give himself away?—she thought,—"I wish *you had* plucked them all and handed them round in *baskets* to the villagers, especially to the old and sick per-

sons. It would have been much better than to have had them sold at Riversford through Oliver Leach."

"Did he sell them?" exclaimed John, quickly. "I am not surprised!"

"He sold everything, and put the money in his own pocket"—said Maryllia,—"But, after all, the loss is quite my own fault. I ought to have enquired into the management of the property myself,—for solicitors more often than not work hand and glove with the agent in charge, —that is why so much mischief is done in overbuilding, and in spoiling the country by cutting down all the trees. And I certainly ought not to have stayed away from home so many years. But it's never too late to mend!" She smiled, and advancing a step or two called "Cicely!"

Cicely turned, looking up from beneath her spreading canopy of dark cedar boughs.

"Oh, Maryllia, we're having such fun!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Adderley is talking words, and I'm talking music! We'll show you how it goes presently!"

"Do, please!" laughed Maryllia; "it must be delightful! Mr. Walden and I are going into the rose-garden. We shall be back in a few minutes!"

She moved along, her white dress floating softly over the green turf, its delicate flounces and knots of rosy ribbon looking like a trail of living flowers. Walden, walking at her side, nodded smilingly as he passed close by Cicely and Julian, his tall athletic figure contrasting well with Maryllia's fairy-like grace,—and presently, crossing from the lawn to what was called the "Cherry-Tree Walk," because the path led under an arched trellis work over which a couple of hundred cherry-trees were trained to form a long arbour or pergola, they turned down it, and drawing closer together in conversation, under the shower of white

blossoms that shed fragrance above their heads, they disappeared. Cicely, struck by a certain picturesqueness, or what she would have called a "stage effect" in the manner of their exit, stopped abruptly in the *pianissimo* humming of a tune with which she declared she had been suddenly inspired by some lines Adderley had just recited.

"Isn't she pretty!" she said, indicating with a jerk of her ever gesticulating hand the last luminous glimmer of Maryllia's vanishing gown. "She's like Titania,—or Kilmeny in Fairyland. Why don't you write something about *her*, instead of about some girl you 'imagine' and never see?"

Adderley, lying at his ease on the grass, turned on his arm and likewise looked after the two figures that had just passed, as it seemed, into a paradise of snowy flowers.

"The girls I 'imagine' are always so much better than those I see," he replied, with uncomplimentary candour.

"Thank you!" said Cicely. "You are *quite* rude, you know! But it doesn't matter."

He stared up at her in vague astonishment.

"Oh, I didn't mean you!" he explained. "*You're* not a girl."

"No, really!" ejaculated Cicely. "Then what am I, pray?"

He looked at her critically,—at her thin sallow little face with the intense eyes burning like flame under her well-marked black eyebrows,—at her drooping angular arms and unformed figure, tapering into the scraggy, long black-stockinged legs which ended in a pair of large buckled shoes that covered feet of a decidedly flat-iron model,—then he smiled oddly.

"*You* are a goblin!"—he said—"An elf,—a pixie—a *witch! You* were born in a dark cave where the sea *dashed in* at high tide and made the rough stones to

with music. There were sea-gulls nesting above your cradle, and when the wind howled, and you cried, they called to you wildly in such a plaintive way that you stopped your tears to listen to them, and to watch their white wings circling round you. You are not a girl—no!—how can you be? For when you grew a little older, the invisible people of the air took you away into a great forest, and taught you to swing yourself on the boughs of the trees, while the stars twinkled at you through the thick green leaves,—and you heard the thrushes sing at morning and the nightingales at evening, till at last you learned the trill and warble and the little caught sob in the throat which almost breaks the heart of those who listen to it! And so you have become what you are, and what I say you always will be—a goblin—a witch!—not a girl, but a genius!"

He waved his hand with a fantastic gesture and raked up his hair.

"That's all very well and very pretty,"—said Cicely, showing her even white teeth in a flashing "goblin" grin, —"But of course you don't mean a word of it! It's merely a way of talking, such as poets, or men that call themselves poets, affect when the 'fit' is on them. Just a string of words,—mere babble. You'd better write them down, though,—you mustn't waste them! Publishers pay for so many words I believe, whether they're sense or nonsense,—please don't lose any halfpence on my account! Do you know you are smiling up at the sky as if you were entirely mad? Ordinary people would say you were, —people to whom dinner is the dearest thing in life would suggest your being locked up. And me, too, I daresay. You *haven't answered* my question,—why don't you write *something about* Maryllia?"

"She, too, is not a girl,"—rejoined Adderley—"She is a woman. And she is absolutely unwritable!"

"Too lovely to find expression even in poetry," said Cicely, complacently.

"No no!—not that! Not that!" And Adderley gave a kind of serpentine writhe on the grass as he raised himself to a half-sitting posture. "Gentle Goblin, do not mistake me! When I say that Miss Vancourt is unwritable, I would fain point out that she is above and beyond the reach of my Muse. I cannot 'experience' her! Yes—that is so! What a poet needs most is the flesh model. The flesh model may be Susan, or Sarah, or Jane of the bar and tap-room,—but she must have lips to kiss, hair to touch, form to caress——"

"Saint Moses!" cried Cicely, with an excited wriggle of her long legs. "Must she?"

"She must!" declared Julian, with decision. "Because when you have kissed the lips, you have experienced a 'sensation,' and you can write—'Ah, how sweet the lips I love.' You needn't love them, of course,—you merely try them. She must be amenable and good-natured, and allow herself to be gazed at for an hour or so till you decide the fateful colour of her eyes. If they are blue, you can paraphrase George Meredith on the 'Blue is the sky, blue is thine eye' system—if black, you can recall the 'Lovely as the light of a dark eye in woman,' of Byron. She must allow you to freely encircle her waist with an arm, so that having felt the emotion you can write—'How tenderly that yielding form, Thrills to my touch!' And then,—even as a painter who pays so much per hour for *studying* from the life,—you can go away and forget her —*or you* can exaggerate her charms in rhyme,—or 'imagine' *that she is* fairer than Endymion's moon-goddess—for

long as she serves you thus she is useful,—but once her uses are exhausted, the poet has done with her, and seeks a fresh sample. Hence, as I say, your friend Miss Vancourt is above my clamour for the Beautiful. I must content myself with some humbler type, and 'imagine' the rest!"

"Well, I should think you must, if that's the way you go to work!" said Cicely, with eyes brimful of merriment and mischief. "Why you are worse than the artists of the Quartier Latin! If you must needs 'experience' your models, I wonder that Susan, Sarah and Jane of the bar and tap-room are good enough for you!"

"Any human female suffices," murmured Julian, drowsily, "provided she is amenable,—and is not the mother of a large family. At the spectacle of many olive branches, the Muse shrieks a wild farewell!"

Cicely broke into a peal of laughter.

"You absurd creature!" she said. "You don't mean half the nonsense you talk—you know you don't!"

"Do I not? But then, what do I mean? Am I justified in assuming that I mean anything?" And he again ran his fingers through his ruddy locks abstractedly. "No,—I think not! Therefore, if I now make a suggestion, pray absolve me from any serious intentions underlying it —and yet——"

"'And yet'—what?" queried Cicely, looking at him with some curiosity.

"Ah! 'And yet!' Such little words, 'and yet!'" he murmured. "They are like the stepping-stones across a brook which divides one sweet woodland dell from another! 'And yet!'" He sighed profoundly, and plucking a daisy from the turf, gazed into its golden heart meditatively. "What I would say, gentle Goblin, is this,

—you call me Moon-calf, therefore there can be no objection to my calling you Goblin, I think?"

"Not the least in the world!" declared Cicely. "I rather like it!"

"So good of you!—so dear!" he said, softly. "Well! —'and yet'—as I have observed, the Muse may, like the Delphic oracle, utter words without apparent signification, which only the skilled proficient at her altar may be able to unravel. Therefore,—in this precise manner, my suggestion may be wholly without point,—or it may not."

"Please get on with it, whatever it is,"—urged Cicely, impatiently—"You're not going to propose to me, are you? Because, if so, it's no use. I'm too young, and I only met you this morning!"

He threw the daisy he had just plucked at her laughing face.

"Goblin, you are delicious!" he averred. "But the ghastly spectre of matrimony does not at present stand in my path, luring me to the frightful chasms of domesticity, oblivion and despair. What was it the charming Russian girl Bashkirtseff wrote on this very subject? 'Me marier et'——?"

"I can tell you!"—exclaimed Cicely—"It was the one sentence in the whole book that made all the men mad, because it showed such utter contempt for them! 'Me marier et avoir des enfants? Mais—chaque blanchisseuse peut en faire autant! Je veux la gloire!' Oh, how I agree with her! Moi, aussi, je veux la gloire!"

Her dark eyes flamed into passion,—for a moment she *looked almost* beautiful. Adderley stared languidly at her *as he would* have stared at the heroine of an exciting *scene on the* stage, with indolent, yet critical interest.

"Goblin *incroyable!*" he sighed. "You are so new! —so fresh!"

"Like salad just gathered," said Cicely, calming down suddenly from her burst of enthusiasm. "And what of your 'suggestion?'"

"My suggestion," rejoined Adderley, "is one that may seem to you a strange one. It is even strange to myself! But it has flashed into my brain suddenly,—and even so inspiration may affect the dullard. It is this: Suppose the Parson fell in love with the Lady, or the Lady fell in love with the Parson? Either, neither, or both?"

Cicely sat up straight in her chair as though she had been suddenly pulled erect by an underground wire.

"What *do* you mean?" she asked. "Suppose the parson fell in love with the lady or the lady with the parson—! Is it a riddle?"

"It may possibly become one"—he replied, complacently—"But to speak more plainly—suppose Mr. Walden fell in love with Miss Vancourt, or Miss Vancourt fell in love with Mr. Walden, what would you say?"

"Suppose a Moon-calf jumped over the moon!" said Cicely disdainfully. "Saint Moses! Maryllia is as likely to fall in love as I am,—and I'm the very last possibility in the way of sentiment. Why, whatever are you thinking of? Maryllia has heaps of men in love with her,—she could marry to-morrow if she liked."

"Aye, no doubt she could marry—that is quite common —but perhaps she could not love!" And Julian waved one hand expressively. "To love is so new!—so fresh!"

"But Maryllia would never fall in love with a *parson!*" declared Cicely, almost resentfully. "A parson!—a country parson too! The idea is perfectly ridiculous!"

A glimmer of white in the vista of the flowering

"Cherry-Tree Walk" here suddenly appeared and warned her that Maryllia and the Reverend John were returning from their inspection of the rose-garden. She checked herself in an outburst of speech and silently watched them approaching. Adderley watched them too with a kind of lachrymose interest. They were deep in conversation, and Maryllia carried a bunch of white and blush roses which she had evidently just gathered. She looked charmingly animated, and now and then a light ripple of her laughter floated out on the air as sweet as the songs of the birds chirping around them.

"The roses are perfectly lovely!" she exclaimed delightedly, as she came under the shadow of the great cedar-tree——"Mr. Walden says he has never seen the standards so full of bud." Here she held the cluster she had gathered under Cicely's nose. "Aren't they delicious! Oh, by-the-bye, Mr. Walden, I have promised you one! You *must* have it, in return for the spray of lilac you gave me when I came to see *your* garden! Now you must take a rose from mine!" And, laying all the roses on Cicely's lap, she selected one delicate half-opened blush-white bloom. "Shall I put it in your coat for you?"

"If you will so far honour me!" answered Walden;—he was strangely pale, and a slight tremor passed over him as he looked down at the small fingers,—pink-tipped as the petals of the flower they so deftly fastened in his buttonhole—"And how"—he continued with an effort, addressing Cicely and Julian—"How have Music and Poetry got on together?"

"*Oh,* we're not married yet"—said Cicely, shaking off the dumb spell which Adderley's "suggestion" had for a moment cast upon her mind—"We ought to be, of course,

—for a real good opera. But we're only just beginning courtship. Mr. Adderley has recited some lines of his own composition, and I have improvised some music. You shall hear the result presently."

"Why not now?" queried Maryllia, as she seated herself in another chair next to Cicely's under the cedar boughs, and signed to Walden to do the same.

"Why, because I believe that the tea is about to arrive. I saw the majestic Primmins in the distance, wrestling with a table—didn't you, Mr. Adderley?"

Adderley rose from his half recumbent position on the grass, and shading his eyes from the afternoon sunshine, looked towards the house.

"Yes,—it is even so!" he replied. "Primmins and a subordinate are on the way hither with various creature comforts. Music and Poetry must pause awhile. Yet why should there be pause? It is for this that I am a follower of Omar Khayyám. He was a materialist as well as a spiritualist, and his muse admits of the aforesaid creature comforts as much as the exalted and subtle philosophies and ironies of life."

"Poor Omar!" said Walden. "The pretty piteousness of him is like the wailing of a lamb led to the slaughter. Grass is good to graze on, saith lambkin,—other lambs are fair to frisk with,—but alas!—neither grass nor lambs can last, and therefore as lambkin cannot always be lambkin, it bleats its end in Nothingness! But, thank God, there is something stronger and wiser in the Universe than lambkin!"

"True!" said Adderley. "But even lambkin has a right to complain of its destiny."

Walden smiled.

"*I think not,*"—he rejoined—"No created thing has a

right to complain of its destiny. It finds itself Here,—and the fact that it *is* Here is a proof that there is a purpose for its existence. What that purpose is we do not know yet, but we *shall* know."

Adderley lifted dubious eyelids.

"You think we shall?"

"Most assuredly! What does Dante Rosetti say?—

> 'The day is dark and the night
> To him that would search their heart;
> No lips of cloud that will part
> Nor morning song in the light;
> Only, gazing alone
> To him wild shadows are shown,
> Deep under deep unknown,
> And height above unknown height
> Still we say as we go:
> "Strange to think by the way
> Whatever there is to know
> That shall we know one day."' "

He recited the lines softly, but with eloquent emphasis. "You see, those of us who take the trouble to consider the working and progress of events, know well enough that this glorious Creation around us is not a caprice or farce. It is designed for a Cause and moves steadily towards that Cause. There may be—no doubt there are—many men who elect to view life from a low, material, or even farcical standpoint—nevertheless, life in itself is serious and noble."

Cicely's dark face lightened as with an illumination while she listened to these words. Maryllia, who had taken up the roses she had laid in Cicely's lap, and was *now* arranging them afresh, looked up suddenly.

"Yet there are many searching truths in the philosophy of Omar Khayyám, Mr. Walden"—she said—"Many

sad facts that even our religion can scarcely get over, don't you think so?"

He met her eyes with a gentle kindliness in his own.

"I think religion, if true and pure, turns all sad facts to sweetness, Miss Vancourt"—he said—"At least, so I have found it."

The clear conviction of his tone was like the sound of a silver bell calling to prayer. A silence followed, broken only by the singing of a little bird aloft in the cedar-tree, whose ecstatic pipings aptly expressed the unspoilt joys of innocence and trust.

"One pretty verse of Omar I remember," then said Cicely, abruptly, fixing her penetrating eyes on Walden. "And it really isn't a bit irreligious. It is this:—

> 'The Bird of Life is singing on the bough,
> His two eternal notes of "I and Thou"—
> O hearken well, for soon the song sings through,
> And would we hear it, we must hear it Now!'"

A white rose slipped from the cluster Maryllia held, and dropped on the grass. John stooped for it, and gave it back to her. Their hands just touched as she smiled her thanks. There was nothing in the simple exchange of courtesies to move any self-possessed man from his normal calm, yet a sudden hot thrill and leap of the heart dazed Walden's brain for a moment and made him almost giddy. A sick fear—an indefinable horror of himself possessed him,—caught by this unnameable transport of sudden and singular emotion, he felt he could have rushed away, away!—anywhere out of reach and observation, and have never entered the fair and halcyon gardens of Abbot's Manor again? Why?—in Heaven's name, why? He could not tell,—but—he had no right to be there!—*no right to be there!*—he kept on repeating to himself;—

he ought to have remained at home, shut up in his study with his dog and his books,—alone, alone, always alone! The brief tempest raged over his soul with soundless wind and fire,—then passed, leaving no trace on his quiet features and composed manner. But in that single instant an abyss had been opened in the depths of his own consciousness,—an abyss into which he looked with amazement and dread at the strange foolhardiness which had involuntarily led him to its brink,—and he now drew back from it, nervously shuddering.

"'And would we hear it, we must hear it Now!'" repeated Adderley, with opportune pathos at this juncture. "As I have said, and will always maintain, Omar's verse always fits in with the happy approach of creature comforts! Behold the illustration and example!—Primmins with the tea!"

"It *is* a pretty verse, though, isn't it?" queried Cicely, moving her chair aside to make more space for the butler and footman as they nimbly set out the afternoon tea-table in the deepest shade bestowed by the drooping cedar boughs. "Isn't it?"

And her searching eyes fastened themselves pertinaciously upon John's face.

"Very pretty!" he answered, steadily. "And—so far as it goes—very true."

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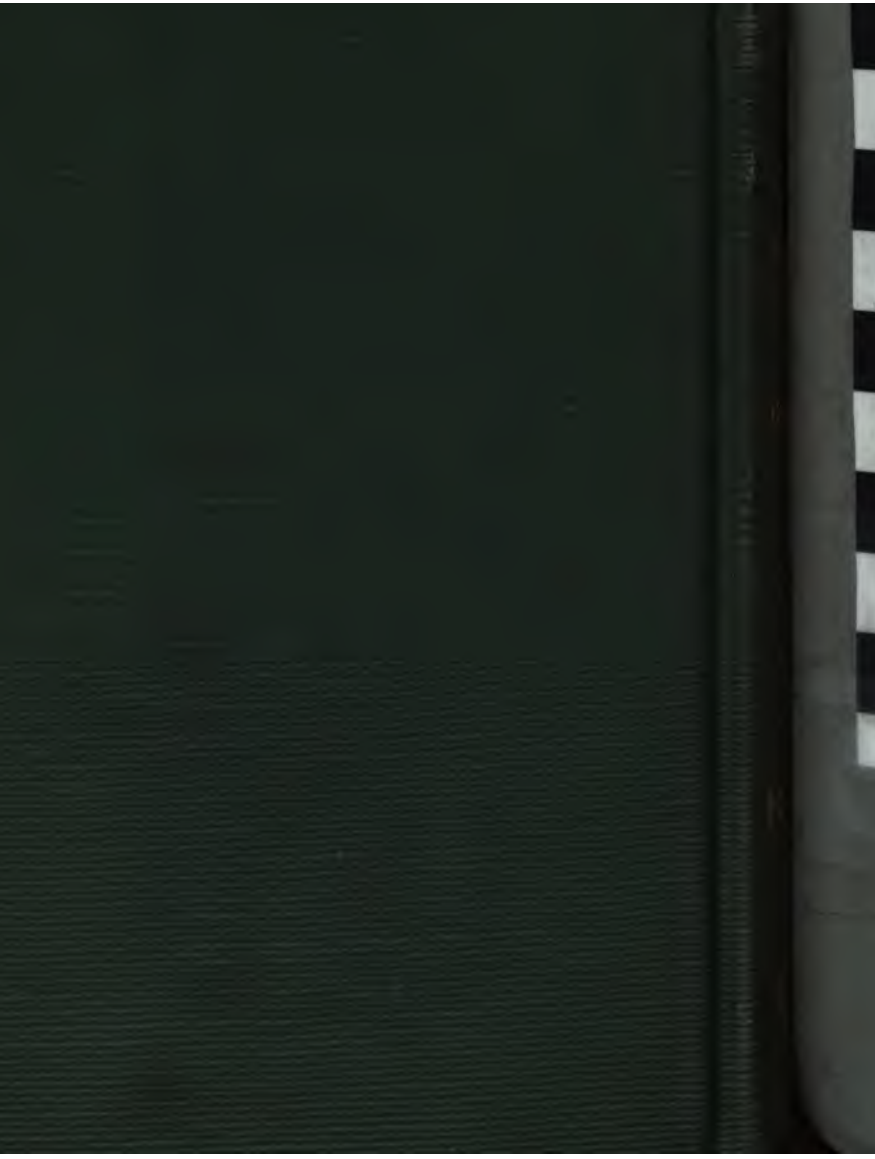
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